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THE PERFECT FOOL

In this novel Roy Fuller is at his best. He follows Alan Percival from his early childhood to his discovery of the truth about his marriage, giving on the one hand a masterly display of social observation, and on the other a sensitive examination of a moral theme.

Alan is brought up in the industrial north, first in his parents' rich house, then, when he is orphaned, in his grandparents' comparatively humble one. We watch him discovering his own intelligence, groping towards opinions, serving in the Royal Navy during the war, falling in love, marrying; and from all this there emerges a wonderfully accurate picture of the subtle shiftings and mutations possible within the British class system. But the heart of the book is in Alan himself, rather than in the world through which he moves, for he is a man who happens to be endowed by nature with innocence. Such a gift can often make a man look a fool and can sometimes make him look heroic. Either way, the impact of the complexities of social living on a trustful mind which expects things to be what they appear to be is illuminating. It is this impact which Roy Fuller is exploring in *The Perfect Fool*, and he does it memorably.

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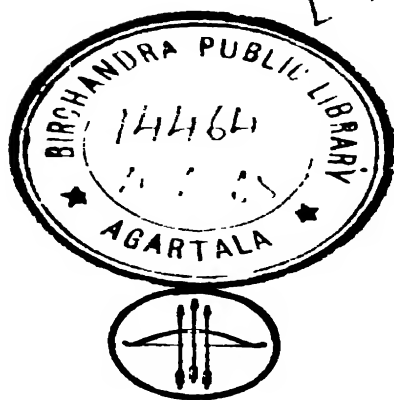
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For Children

SAVAGE GOLD

ROY FULLER

The Perfect Fool



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I

One day he was in the hall, saying goodbye to his father. His mother had intimated to him that his father was going away to have an operation and though he sensed the emotion in her voice he did not reveal any of his, and perhaps the reason was that his father simply stood there in his hat and coat as though about to leave for work, betraying so far as could be seen no pits or excrescences which could possibly serve as serious material for the surgeon's knife. It seemed proper, too, to respect the calm ordinariness of his father's actions and the tactful consideration, proper to his own immature age, of his mother's, by behaving himself in a perhaps exaggeratedly normal way and, indeed, by trying to *feel* as though this departure were like a thousand others. So that later he could not have said whether his father had driven to the hospital in the Crossley—a procedure certainly attended by complications, for his mother did not drive and therefore could not bring the car back—or taken a taxicab. He had relieved his parents of some of the burden of acquainting him with the realities of life and their unhappiness by quitting the hall, before his father had gone, along the passage that led to the kitchen and the back door. This in turn led to a yard which had been concreted on their moving into the house the year before—;art of the abundant evidence of his father's attaching them with substantial material links to the new dwelling—from which you could get to the back of the garden and thence to a road entirely different from the road the house faced.

Alan used this secondary exit with sentiments of pride scarcely less intense than when he went in and out of the front gate, hoping that his evident familiarity with the latch (and thus his identification with the house) would be observed—the house whose superiority, though best displayed by its fanciful elevation, was indubitably demonstrated by the remoteness of its rear access. As he had come down the path that followed the successive levels of the garden, he had seen the distant town smoking in its green valley, and the sunlight that gave the plume from each mill chimney its special quality of white or brown seemed also designed to impress upon him what had been said to him in the hall—though this was a supererogatory aspect of the day, for the moment had been in itself sufficiently memorable. So, too, the leaf he plucked in passing of the bush that overhung the back gate had in addition to its familiar physique the power to impose on him a sense of its particular and imperishable existence. *

He crossed the street. The Rhodes' house lay on an altogether lower level. He went along the side of it, through a green trellis door, past the rabbit hutch, and to the end of the back garden where he found Joan in the den sweeping its bare earth floor with a broom. 'It's in a terrible state,' she said. 'I simply had to get down to some cleaning.'

'Shall I shake the carpet?' he asked, having observed this object on the grass outside the den.

'I think you'd better,' she said.

He began to flap the carpet with a vigour that reflected some of his otherwise unexpressed feeling about his father's departure, as though by throwing himself heart and soul into this activity he guaranteed its equal importance to the affair of the operation. He visualized and rejected the possibility of telling Joan about the thing, because not only of the unlikelihood of her interest but also the unthinkable betrayal of the crack in the normality of his family's façade. The skeleton of the threadbare carpet was hard in his hands. Dust from the den came though the interstices of its walls which were formed out of the great wicker skips which Mr Rhodes—with an indulgence at which Alan marvelled—had had trans-

ported for that particular purpose from the mill where he was works' manager. Since it was impossible, despite abundant evidence, to conceive oneself as loved, it required a special effort of imagination to grasp that that emotion was bestowed on others.

He poked his head into the door of the den, and said: 'That job's done.'

'Fill the vases,' she commanded, handing him the two glass jam jars and throwing out of the window the shrunken daisies they had contained. Along the path he smelt the attractively disgusting brown water at the bottom of the jars before swishing it over the lawn. The garden tap reared its iron neck deep within a border, and when he had filled the jars he micturated among the shrubs. Having evidently finished her sweeping, Joan came up behind him and said: 'I can do it standing up, too.' Perhaps through a curiosity too profound to show itself by a concern for detail, his only precise perception of the operation was to note its obvious imperfection. Her motive for attempting it (and he was quite aware of the attitude she normally adopted from his presence at previous necessitous occasions) was plain to him, for she had never made any secret of her wish to be like the opposite sex. It had been arranged on coming to the new house that he should travel with her to the school she already attended and at which he was to start, and the very first morning, on the way to the tram stop, she had pushed the garters down her thin thighs to below her knees and rolled her long black stockings over them so that they bore a superficial resemblance to the 'golf' stockings he himself wore with his short trousers. Her velour hat she had already slid off the back of her head so that it was suspended by the elastic from her neck, and she had hooked her short blonde hair behind her ears. In this forceful masculine guise she had chatted familiarly to the tram conductor, shown Alan where to hang his coat, taken him to Miss Bostock. In the classroom Miss Bostock wrote on the blackboard the mysterious word 'TRANSCRIPTION'. Alan sat in a sweating panic as all busied themselves with pens and exercise books, until he was compelled by the

impossibility of any further procrastination to whisper to Joan who sat in the double desk with him: 'What do we do?' Her response was neither harsh nor scathing. Indicating the open reader on the desk, she said: 'Just copy this.' With an ineffable sense of happiness at her proximity and his own intellectual mastery, he had dipped his pen in the china ink-well sunk in the desk and rattled it about in the ink with superfluous purpose.

Seeing the various leaves in the shrubbery, Alan said: 'Shall we make some jewellery?'—meaning by that term the knitting together of leaf and flower or berry according to the ingenuity of the maker which was one of the, to him, several strange and fascinating pursuits to which she had introduced him.

'We've done rather a lot of that lately,' she said, picking up the jam jars. 'Besides, we must get the den straight.'

He saw immediately the feebleness of his suggestion, and followed her to the bottom of the garden. When the state of the den was to her liking they lay down to rest on the carpet. A dog barked not far away but otherwise it seemed to him that they really were in that remote and autonomous dwelling her imagination had conceived. With no support for his head he gazed straight up at the boards of the low roof and the knot-holes he knew as intimately as the scabs that hardened from time to time on his knees and hands. And then, since they were supposed to be asleep, he closed his eyes, and as his mind counted out the hours of an actual night, his leg momentarily touched hers. He yawned and stretched his arms.

'It's time you went out hunting,' she observed, and he agreed and crawled out into the sunlight leaving her lying there. Alone, he went conscientiously through the motions of stalking and killing some prey, but he could not help wondering what was the real time, with its demand on him to return home.

The moors' green shoulder filled half the sky that he saw from his bedroom window. When his mother had left him

he had lugged the volume of *Chums* back into bed. Now he could only see to read if he balanced the heavy crimson book on the window sill. He turned the page and came to an illustration by the artist his father had once eternally categorized by remarking that the feet of his male figures were always made disproportionately and absurdly large. Alan had failed to observe this as he had failed properly to observe, for example, the words 'Trade Mark' on the tin of vaseline often brought out to anoint his chaps or grazes, betraying this deficiency by reading aloud one day to the scorn of the maid, Nellie: 'Vaseline—Ted Mark'—the phrase having reasonably denoted to his understanding the inventor or manufacturer of the useful unguent.

As his eyes continued to try to take in the words of the story—though now the whiteness of the page and the blackness of the print had almost coalesced in a uniform greyness—he heard from the landing a cough of masculine depth, and for a moment imagined, with mingled fear and joy, that his father had returned from hospital not having undergone the operation or having suffered merely some superficial excision. But as the footsteps passed the door he heard a snatch of song in the falsetto voice his grandfather always assumed for that purpose.

Because God made thee mine, I'll cherish thee.

At the sound of the cough Alan had closed his book and let it slip between the wall and the bed, and now he lay back on the pillow, listening to the rattle of the plug in the WC and, a few seconds later, the voice passing his door once more.

. . . a wider world of hope and joy I see.

It struck him that in the privacy of going to the lavatory his grandfather had chosen to sing this song (one of the serious songs Alan had heard his grandmother perform, accompanying herself at the piano) rather than the somewhat ribald ditties of his social moments. Or perhaps it was that the solemn occasion that Alan did not doubt had brought his grandparents from their house at the other end of the town to comfort his

mother forbade the utterance of songs such as the one about the mouse in the beer. A visit from his grandparents was in itself a sort of crisis, for it had been borne in on him from a score of incidents that the curious taste of his father preferred their absence—though it was true that since his father was not here the reason for objecting to their presence was removed. Indeed, what would normally have been mysterious and a source of speculation—the subjects of the adult conversation whose sudden laughter and intensities on just such occasions as this would float inscrutably up to him from downstairs—was tonight perfectly manifest, for since his mother had often reminded him that once she had been his grandparents' little girl and lived with them in their house it was plain that with his father away she would relapse into that simple and comprehensible relationship.

He saw through the window that a slim moon and a single star glowed on the clear sky, and turning his head realized that the room had grown quite dark. At the same time he became conscious of the cistern under the roof making its remote but variable and interminable noises, following his grandfather's call. Instantly he knew that outside the door, somewhere in the bedroom even—at the far side of the wardrobe or crouching behind the head of the bed—were the figures he feared, and he slid frantically down the bedclothes and pulled them up over his head. Though in the enclosed space he could hear his quick breathing, his invisibility to anything that might now have stepped out of its hiding place guaranteed, he felt, his safety, and all he need do was to keep himself covered up and wait for his heartbeats to slow down. In fact, since he had by now tucked the sheet behind his head he was emboldened to move about a little and even with his forearms and raised knees make a modest tent. And immediately he observed, as always, that though the operation of making a tent in bed necessarily involved using some parts of one's body for the structure itself, nevertheless one had the same satisfactory feeling, as one had with a real tent, that one was completely inside it. Nor did bed strike him as having any inconvenient limitations of size: for example, it was

possible to bend forward and turn on one's back until one was lying in the tent in the completely opposite aspect, and in that event the vulnerable aperture at the top of the bed could be kept closed with one's feet. And because the whole cavern of bed was composed of a material more clinging than the deepest darkness, even the comparatively short journeys to its sides could seem mysteriously prolonged. The territory, too, was by no means featureless: as well as a patch, its essential lumpiness almost smoothed away by successive launderings, or a long seam where the sheet had been put sides to middle, he would sometimes come across a fold containing a few sharp biscuit crumbs or, just vanishing over the bottom limit of the mattress, a dead hot-water bottle or one of two or three stuffed toys which had survived from his baby days and which he occasionally brought into bed as the *dramatis personae* of a bedtime game. His nights were amply long enough for inordinate time to be wasted in these explorations and imaginings, and it never occurred to him that he was under a duty to devote any particular epoch or proportion of them to sleep. When he first went to bed it was the outside of the crisp quilt, humped into mountain ranges by the volcanic action of his legs, that engaged his attention; only on settling down was he drawn to the cool littorals of the interior. If he roused in the night the bedclothes seemed to have shrunk to a small clinging nest, but with the coming of the light a vast crumpled terrain lay before him, presented often enough in a startlingly unfamiliar aspect by reason of his waking not with his head on the pillow but half over one side or other of the bed. In this morning period everything had a rather more improvised and urgent air. If it was light enough to read he might find himself face downwards addressing the page with his pillow as a great abdominal poultice. Or lying idly on his back his toes would descend and encounter, where the top sheet had become untucked as a result of all these nocturnal activities, a strip of blanket like some hairy animal stretched across the foot of the bed.

In the early part of the night, as now, sleep was scarcely differentiated from wakefulness, for he never decided on

sleep, it being merely an incurable consequence of putting his book away, or switching out the light, and his thoughts easily became dreams. He pictured his grandfather turning at the bottom of the stairs to go across the hall and into the drawing-room, seeing clearly the moustache, the strong nose, the large head rather flat on top, across which the fine hair was combed into a quiff. Sometimes the hair appeared grey, sometimes golden, and since Alan's hair was black he had once seemed to himself a changeling among the blondnesses of his mother and her father until he had realized with his usual delayed understanding that it was his father he resembled, nor was it in the least *outré* so to do. Thus also in the past he had been puzzled on discovering that his grandparents' name was Wrigley, though his own was indubitably Percival, until the curious mechanics of his mother having changed the one name to the other had by chance been explained to him.

Though his grandparents had aptly appeared tonight, he comprehended that their visit had entailed considerable effort, for it was not for them a matter of simply getting in the Crossley but of making a tram journey of stupendous length, his own considerable journey from school being merely the home stretch of it. At Greenhead the tramlines ended (in a fashion that always seemed to him to copy crudely some simple and rather unsatisfactory part of his toy train system) and then those who did not possess a motor-car were compelled to climb the hill, along a road which quite soon began to take on positively rural characteristics, to Green Head Lodge, which was the remarkably impressive identification of this house, painted in shadowed letters on the black gate. It was a matter for pity that his grandparents still inhabited a house with a number in the part of the town from which his own parents had graduated. Already he was beginning to forget the time when he could walk in a few minutes to his grandparents' house, and even regularly play in the alley that ran between it and a chicken run instead of in the back street of his own house. In those days, when it was a commonplace for his father to be sitting at the bridge table in his grand-

father's dining-room, Alan had no conception that his father had any special emotion towards his mother's parents. Only now, with the Friday visits of Mr and Mrs Ollier, did he understand what the game truly involved—the huge fur coat lying across his parents' bed, the smell of cigars, soda water squirted against the side of a tumbler, and accordingly his father's previous condescension.

He turned on his side and, moving his feet to a cooler part of bed, recalled the encounter that afternoon of his leg with Joan's. The memory was less a memory than the precise reconstitution of the experience, only on this occasion it was accompanied by a feeling of pleasure so intense and real that he could not have said what emotion the actual event had occasioned.

He had imagined that when his father came home from hospital life would go on precisely as in pre-hospital days, but in fact a new epoch started that soon completely eclipsed the old. The Crossley was replaced by a Lanchester driven by a chauffeur with a stiff leg, called Williams. After a few weeks his father began going to work again but at a suitably late hour of the morning for one driven to the mill by a chauffeur, and on the very first day after the new term started Alan found that in the afternoon his father was home before him, standing at one of the drawing-room windows.

'Where's your mother?' Mr Percival asked.

Alan paid little attention to this inquiry, thinking that since his father had been in the house longer he was more likely to know the answer. His father walked to the other window—a useless procedure, Alan thought, since both windows gave on to parts of the garden quite unconnected with the front drive along which his mother might be expected to appear in due course if she were out. But possibly Mr Percival was not really engaged in looking out, for he paced quite rapidly from one window to the other. His progress was only halted by his saying: 'For goodness' sake, Alan, stop opening and shutting that cigarette box. And just look at the finger-marks you're leaving on it.'

Alan could not deny the justice of this criticism, and to lessen its impact he remarked sociably: 'It's absolutely packed full with cigarettes.'

'We don't say "packed *full*",' Mr Percival countered, 'just "packed".'

'Well,' said Alan, 'you can pack something and it needn't be full, and then you can pack something else *full*. Like this cigarette box.'

Since his father did not reply to this argument it was evident that he thought it as brilliant and conclusive as Alan himself did. Mr Percival continued his pacing and eventually remarked, as much to himself as to Alan: 'I wish your mother would leave a message when she's going to be out.'

Alan waited a minute until his father's irritability should have died down and then suggested that she might have gone to the Rhodes' house. He was only waiting for tea to be over to go himself, so that the attractions of the place were plain. His father seemed to accept his conjecture, for he left the window and came to one of the easy chairs. As he lowered himself into this he groaned audibly and when at last he was seated he said: 'My God, it's terrible.'

Though Alan was standing quite near he thought it best politely to ignore both his father's lack of agility and betrayal of weakness, so uncharacteristic and, indeed, embarrassing. He continued to play with a fringe of the always fascinating suède straps that held an ashtray in place on an arm of the settee. Looking up after a decent interval he saw that Mr Percival was resting his head against the back of the chair with his eyes closed. Alan decided that after all he would go and call on Joan before tea since that event seemed now to be separated by a tedious interval and was about to step surreptitiously out of the room when Mr Percival opened his eyes and said: 'You can pass me those cigarettes.'

When he held out the open box his father was wiping his upper lip with a handkerchief as though the day were warm. 'Can I light it for you?' he asked. His father assented and he brought the silver match-box and struck one of the wax vestas on its corrugated side. Since Mr Percival now seemed

to be behaving in a normal way, Alan ventured to say that he was in a new form.

'Oh, very good,' said Mr Percival, the smoke from his mouth grey, that from the cigarette between his fingers blue. He appeared to concentrate. 'Is that Miss Bostock's?'

'Miss Bostock was my old form,' said Alan, pityingly. 'I have Miss Rance now.'

'Of course.'

'We do poetry in this form.'

'Recite some.'

Alan's first reaction was to despise his father's too practical and literal mind, but as he considered the matter he realized that his inability to comply with the request and, indeed, his vagueness as to what precisely constituted poetry was either a sad reflection on Miss Rance's teaching or his own intellectual powers. He recalled the notebooks with which the class had that day been issued for the purpose of copying into them poems of their own choice, and wondered with a sense of panic where he would be able to find these technical and mysterious entities. 'I can't remember any,' he confessed, thinking what boastful folly it had been in him to bring up the subject at all. But Mr Percival failed to press home his advantage, now leaning slightly forward in his chair as though he found its stuff uncomfortable to his back, and tapping unceasingly the coal of his cigarette in the ashtray that was a twin of the one on the settee. 'Will you tell me a story, Father?' Alan added.

'It was a dark and stormy night,' said Mr Percival, 'and the wind was howling fast, and the king said to Antonio: "Antonio, tell us a tale." And Antonio's tale was this: "It was a dark and stormy night and the wind was howling fast, and the king said to Antonio—"'

Alan's amused protests interrupted this familiar narration, but his father did not comply with his request for a real story. His mother coming into the room at this point, he ran to her and said: 'I'm in a new form.'

He heard his father say behind him: 'Where on earth have you been, Enid?'

'I didn't think you'd be home yet,' said Mrs Percival, ignoring her son, who at the rebuff decided that he would tell her no more and left the room as his father launched on some account of his feelings at the mill that afternoon.

In the event, Mr Percival gave up going to the mill and the ensuing weeks established a routine under which the mornings of Williams and the Lanchester were sparsely employed in taking Alan to school, and their afternoons in driving Mr and Mrs Percival in search of pleasure. Alan, having had the power bequeathed to him of diverting the car on its morning journeys and picking up Joan Rhodes, and hearing of his parents eating tea in distant beauty spots and even strolling along the sea front, regarded this change of habit as further satisfactory evidence of their prosperity and skill at living. He was at length admitted to their orgy of pleasure by its being announced one Saturday that they were all to go to the races.

They drove away from the town and soon left the familiar green undulations with their dark nets of stone walls, coming out on to the open moorland with a shoal of hills in the distance stained by the withering bracken. 'Better than school,' Williams remarked. Alan sat by him on the front seat, his parents so far behind in the back that they seemed in a different world.

'We've got less than a quarter of petrol,' announced Alan, reading the dial.

'Have we now?' said Williams.

'You'll have to have her filled up soon.'

Williams took one gauntleted glove off the wheel and rested it on his blue overcoated thigh. Alan put his own hand on the vacant quadrant of the wheel. 'Mind this pot-hole,' said Williams, and Alan seemed to steer them successfully round it.

'Let's go faster,' Alan said.

'This is fast enough, Master Alan. We don't want to jolt your father.'

Alan knelt on the seat and looked into the back of the car. 'We're only doing thirty-five,' he said. A rug covered Mr and

Mrs Percival's legs and on the rug each clasped a gloved hand of the other.

'Are we?' said Mrs Percival. 'Don't put your shoes on the seat.'

By a bridge over a stream they stopped for their picnic lunch. Mr and Mrs Percival stayed in the car: Alan and Williams ate their sandwiches sitting on the low stone parapet of the bridge. Williams took off his cap to let the autumn sunshine reach his head, which was covered with thin blond brilliantined hair, as insubstantial, where the band of the cap had been pressing, as a leaf between the pages of a book. The cap was placed peak upward on the parapet to form a receptacle for the gauntlet gloves: the inside of its top was composed of a stiff green material, beaded with perspiration or grease. Williams's scrubbed hands seemed still to be encased in gloves—gloves made from thick dead skin—and one of them held a sandwich as if to conceal it, the attached forearm supported on the knee. It was strange to see him eating, as though he were an ordinary human being.

'Where do you live, Williams?' Alan asked. Williams told him, and, in response to further questioning, that he lived with Mrs Williams his wife, but to Alan this private life, albeit carried on in a district of the town he passed through every day on the way to school, appeared quite spectral, for its interest must be despicably pale beside that of the existence Williams led with *them*, which, indeed, left him very little time for another.

Alan dropped a boring edge of bread into the water and said: 'If you don't want any more sandwiches, Williams, I'll take them to the car for Father.'

'Your father won't eat pork sandwiches, Master Alan.'

'Why not?' Alan said, though he divined instantly that they were forbidden by the state of his father's digestion, and marvelled that Williams knew better than he did the intimacies of their family life.

So, too, when they had joined the crowds and streams of vehicles and moved into a park-like venue for the hitherto mysterious conception 'the races', it was Williams who

cleared away the impending rug and fur-lined foot-muffs and unobtrusively eased Mr Percival from the car, handing him, as he did so, a shooting-stick in gleaming steel and leather which immediately absorbed Alan's attention.

'Where did you get that from?' he asked accusingly, as they moved from the line of cars towards the stands.

Mr Percival, whose spirits seemed somewhat revived on their reaching their destination, continued to use the contraption to support his footsteps, and replied: 'Can't a man buy himself a shooting-stick?'

'I've never seen it before.'

'Too bad.'

'Can I have it for a minute?'

Mr Percival handed it to his son while he unbuttoned some layers of clothing to get at his wallet for the money demanded as the price of admission to the inner enclosure.

'What a lot of pound notes you've got, Father,' Alan remarked, sticking the lethal point of the shooting-stick into the ground as though it were a Zulu spear.

'Do mind people's feet, Alan,' said Mrs Percival.

Alan quickly grasped the nature and purpose of the entertainment offered by the races, and though he saw little of the bright jockeys and strenuous horse-flesh in the arena that stretched so greenly beyond the crowds, he began to share in his father's disappointments and triumphs and even spared a thought for the destiny of the insignificant amounts risked by Williams, whom Mr Percival's generosity had admitted to these pleasures. When Mr Percival returned following his disappearance after the third race had been run, Alan cried out when he was still some yards away: 'How much have you won?' From his mother's demur and the amused turned heads of several of the neighbouring spectators he realized that he had been guilty of some naivety or bad manners, but his father merely smiled and said: 'Seven pounds.'

'Golly.'

'Do you want to have a bet, Alan?' asked Mr Percival.

'Oh, Carl,' Mrs Percival protested.

'It won't do the boy any harm.' He handed Alan the race-card. 'These are the horses running in the next race. Choose one of them and I'll put half a crown on for you.'

Exotic lines of what seemed to be poetry came into focus before Alan's eyes. 'Any one?'

'Any one you like,' said Mr Percival. 'Come on, Williams, the same applies to you.'

When these difficult but pleasurable decisions had been made and Mr Percival had gone off again to the distant line of blackboards and coloured umbrellas, Alan heard Williams say to his mother: 'The Master's enjoying himself.'

'He gets so excited.'

'He won't let me place the bets for him, you know. He likes to do everything himself.'

'He looks terrible,' said Mrs Percival, and Alan was dismayed to hear in this public place devoted to these daring pleasures the faltering note of grief in his mother's voice and the not unfamiliar single dry sob that she was unable to suppress of the many that clearly longed to escape.

'He's just tired himself out today,' said Williams.

'Yes, he has,' said Mrs Percival, in a firmer tone. 'We must try and get him to go before it's over. Speak to him, Williams.'

'We'll miss a bit of the crowd that way, too.'

Alan was surprised at this conspiratorial intimacy but not displeased that it was Mr Percival and not himself who was being treated as the child of the party and subjected to these patronizing sanctions. He said sagely: 'If my horse wins can I keep the money?'

'I expect so,' said his mother.

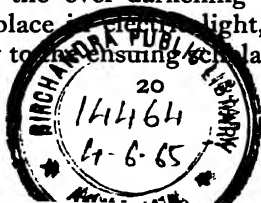
'I'll buy some soldiers with it—cavalry. Two boxes.'

When Mr Percival returned with the sheaf of betting tickets, Alan eyed him carefully and saw that his aspect was, if the nuances of the word in this context had been properly grasped, indeed 'terrible'. Though the day was close, as Alan's wearing of a mere raincoat proved, Mr Percival had on a woollen scarf and his thick overcoat, and notwithstanding that he had opened the latter his forehead was glistening with perspiration, plainly visible because the bowler hat was pushed

to the back of the head. His face, which Alan remembered from a prior, normal phase of existence as swarthy, was pallid, positively white round the eyes. But this vision of his father through the eyes of others quickly faded as Alan was formally handed the evidence of his wager and Mr Percival expanded on his own betting strategy and adroitness about securing the odds.

However, it was no real surprise to Alan to find that when this race was over he had failed to win any money and that his father admitted to tiredness and a readiness for home. They stopped for tea at a large, chill, gloomy hotel in the nearby town, from which they emerged to find the daylight almost gone. As the car bored with its headlights into the empty anonymous countryside, Alan rested his neck on the back of the seat and before closing his eyes watched the dark ragged tree-tops passing overhead in irregular but monotonous motion. He awoke to find Williams gone from his side and opening one of the rear doors of the car for Mr Percival to alight, from whom, lost against the black hedge, there soon came the sounds of retching. A sadness, a disappointment, an excruciating sense of anticlimax, suffused him, all of which he thought it best to hide by pretending to be still asleep—until the sounds, and the three voices each with its special emotion unconcealed by the restraint imposed by his supposed slumber or very presence, ceased and the car moved on again and he truly slept.

The expedition to the races marked the end of a certain epoch in Mr Percival's condition. A routine was established thereafter in which he rose after lunch and went to bed early but soon he ceased to appear downstairs at all. Since his mother more often than not ate from a tray in the bedroom, Alan found himself taking his meals with Nellie, and they were joined at breakfast by the daily, Mrs Platt, who on her arrival drank a cup of tea with them sitting at the kitchen table. The dialogues—virtually duologues—of these occasions, conducted during the ever-darkening early mornings until at last they took place in feeble light, impressed him as a logical preliminary to the ensuing scholastic broadening of his



knowledge. Mrs Platt had very rapidly sketched out the circumstances of her life and each morning kept them up to date on the condition of her gall bladder, the amatory affairs of her grown-up children, and the state of mind of Mr Platt, who had come out in the General Strike earlier in the year and had never succeeded in regaining employment. Such things were easy of comprehension, but often the conversation of the two ladies had a baffling obliquity. It was quite early in the sequence of these mornings that Alan heard Mrs Platt inquire: 'And when is she due, then?' The question, for some reason that was quite unclear to him, registered itself on his consciousness as the previous exchanges between his companions preliminary to this had positively not.

'Well, she's never told me exactly,' was Nellie's reply.

By no sign did Alan betray his interest, but continued to read, as he often did, the somewhat curious information on the syrup tin that micro-organisms could not live in that food.

'That's funny,' said Mrs Platt.

'Oh, I'm used to not being told things.'

'What I'm surprised at is their having one,' said Mrs Platt, her voice reverberating slightly across the surface of the cup of tea which she had now raised to her eager lips.

'Well,' said Nellie.

'I mean him in his condition.'

'Oh, it was on the way before.'

'Oh, was it?' said Mrs Platt.

'Oh yes,' said Nellie.

She was about to continue speaking, but Mrs Platt without any change of tone from her previous utterances except a perhaps increased nonchalance, remarked: 'Little pigs have big ears.'

'Do you want a fill-up, Mrs Platt?' asked Nellie.

'Yes, please, love,' Mrs Platt replied, draining her cup and passing it over. 'Well, young man, what is it today? Dancing lesson?'

'No.'

'You're a lucky lad,' said Mrs Platt. 'I wish I was back in my school days.'

Alan regarded her with calm curiosity, as he might have regarded, had it slipped out of its own strange world into his, one of the more grotesque but quite unsinister characters—a gnome, say—of his story-books. He said: ‘Will you do that thing, Mrs Platt?’

She required no explanation of this cryptic remark, but immediately began to extend her tongue. As always, he was at first convinced that it could not possibly be long enough and, indeed, it came out of her mouth perhaps no further than a normal tongue. But when eventually she turned it upwards he saw with a frisson of pleasure that the business might after all be capable of accomplishment; and so, as with a final effort—though effort was certainly scarcely the word, for the whole operation consisted of one continuous motion—she indubitably rested for an observable space of time the tip of her tongue on the tip of her little nose, he let a laugh of sheer pleasure escape him, and she, slipping the prehensile organ back in its insignificantly toothed pouch, cackled in turn.

‘You’re going to be late for school,’ said Nellie, with her customary irritability.

This was one of the last of the mornings when he was driven by Williams, for it was clear that a chauffeur could not be kept merely to take a child to school. Williams ceased to be one of the household and the Lanchester was constantly visible through the garage window draped in a dust sheet.

Frequently Alan went to see his father in bed and there would sometimes ensue a conversation in which Mr Percival would assume the ironic or affectionate role of the past, even, when Alan leant his elbows on the bed, pressing his son’s head on the quilt, and repeating, as he drummed gently on the boy’s back:

*‘Rumbledom, bumbledom, very bad luck,
How many fingers do I hold up?’*

—and continuing the game until Alan was satiated. There might be evidence, too, of Mr Percival’s enduring connection

with the outside world, such as a batch of foreign stamps torn from envelopes addressed to the mill. But eventually it became apparent that Alan was only to enter the bedroom upon specific invitation, and the greater formality of these occasions induced a greater formality in him, so that after one glance at his father's face—often with a dark growth of beard—he might occupy his brief stay by, say, playing with the ball of wool from his mother's knitting.

However, he was astonished to overhear Mrs Percival say to Mr and Mrs Ollier, on one of their visits to the house: 'What upsets Carl more than anything is that Alan's got frightened of him.' Though since his father had uttered and his mother had accepted this conception it was doubtless true, nevertheless he knew it to be too simple and he yearned for a power of expression and of action to show both his parents the profundity of his feelings. How well he recognized the attitude of the Olliers, who still persisted with their weekly call and at first had persuaded Mrs Percival into an hour of three-handed bridge after their brief interview with the invalid, but who now arrived late and left early, and sat with alternatively grave and too-cheerful faces. It seemed to Alan that for Mr Ollier even his ability to run his Talbot into the drive was a source of guilt, and perhaps it was to assuage it that before entering the vehicle at the end of the visit he would press half a crown into Alan's hand. Mr Percival's absence gave living a feeble amateur air (Mrs Percival squirting the soda into Mr Ollier's whisky was an action to bring not pleasure but melancholy), and even for Alan the removal of the rigorous sanctions in the realm of behaviour and speech by his father's incarceration were, after all, a dilution of the quality of experience—just as the current presence of the syrup tin on the breakfast table, though a pleasure and convenience, denoted a sad degeneration of standards, a positive moral offence.

It was to the Olliers also that he heard his mother remark that she thanked goodness that of course Alan didn't understand—a principle that on its enunciation he accepted completely and with a glow of comfort. But since it didn't

dissipate his acute sense of there being in this life they were leading a remorseless progression of undesirable events, the workings of a cruelly unfair fate, he began to see it as evidence of his mother's lack of understanding. For his immature age did not prevent him from going always on tip-toe past the door of the bedroom where his father lay, listening and trying not to listen; from hearing with a jealous sinking of the heart the commonplace exchanges between Joan Rhodes and her parents—exchanges whose very banality assumed a confidence in the continued normality of life that Alan realized he had wholly lost. If he didn't understand, it was merely the mechanical parts of the business that escaped him, and this was scarcely to be wondered at since his knowledge of them had to come from fortuitous eavesdropping or the interpretation of allusive conversations. He himself was surely clear and acute enough: the ignorance and distortion came from the reticences of the adult world.

Even the discontinuances of his memory seemed the fault of others. At one of their breakfast-time conversations Nellie said to Mrs Platt: 'Of course, there was another one in between.'

'Was there?' said Mrs Platt. 'I didn't know that.'

'It would have been three,' said Nellie.

At first Alan's knowledge was no greater than Mrs Platt's had been, but in a little while, accompanying his comprehension of Nellie's words and with a sense of incredulity at his not having had the momentous thing constantly in mind over the years, he recalled the old house in Hampton Street and the new sister for whose arrival his warm anticipation had been solicited and for whose immediate death his pity had, not quite in vain, been expected. That he had been allowed to forget these events was no doubt because his parents had realized how imperfect had been his notion of death in those days—the disappearance of his infant sister being no more phenomenal to him than the mislaying of an unfavourite doll. But now he understood that dying involved being taken from earth to heaven, was a positive cessation of existence among the living; that the happiness of the dead and certainty of

meeting with the dead upon one's own death were not sufficient to remove the sadness and pain of bereavement. And though death was not really important enough to constitute life as a mere battle against it, nevertheless it was an eventuality that one must envisage as possibly happening in the sector of one's own experience—just as 'the unemployed' found personification in Mr Platt.

A dark, severe lady arrived wearing a hat with a crease along it, like a man's. 'You remember your Auntie Teresa, Alan,' Mrs Percival asseverated, but any recollection of his father's sister was dim. The lady bent down to kiss him and he saw also a masculine moustache.

'He's forgotten me,' said Aunt Teresa. 'He's shy, too.' She lifted her hands and drew two long pins from the hat.

Alan put his arm round his mother and said: 'Aren't you getting fat?'

'Oh, Alan,' said Mrs Percival, and from her tone of reproach he knew that she felt more than mere annoyance at his remark which therefore contained more significance than the mere indiscretion often attaching to the unwilling things he said to cover up his own embarrassment or that of others. He had seen, too, that his aunt's appearance had caused tears to spring to Mrs Percival's eyes (though the former lady seemed reasonably amiable and well-disposed), so that his sense of guilt at his behaviour was all the more acute.

They all went into the drawing-room where the fire had not been lit since the Olliers' visit of the previous week—a sufficient indication of the strange ways into which the household had grown and of the momentousness of Aunt Teresa's visit. He stood by his mother's chair and she placed her hand on his hair. 'Of course, he doesn't understand,' she added to whatever she had been saying.

It occurred to him that it was no wonder that he didn't understand in view of the pains that were taken to remove him from every crisis and to keep from his ears any information of an enlightening kind. There was, too, his own endeavour to co-operate in this conspiracy by wilfully failing to make

deductions from the clues that were offered him, by appearing to be—and the effort was negligible—more stupid than he really was.

When Mrs Percival went to see about tea he made to leave the room with her but was alarmingly instructed to remain with his aunt, who to his amazement withdrew a mother-of-pearl cigarette case from her handbag and proceeded to smoke. 'You're like Carl,' she remarked.

'You are, too, Auntie Teresa,' he said, emboldened to be forthcoming by the knowledge that no lady who expected normal inhibited behaviour could possibly smoke. His aunt nodded but did not speak again until she requested him to pass an ashtray. 'Are you staying for Christmas?' he then asked.

'Oh no,' said his aunt. 'I'm going back to my school tomorrow. That is in Aberdeen. Do you know where Aberdeen is?'

He did not, and the conversation languished until his mother returned. Instructing Nellie as to some detail of the business of tea, his mother referred to his aunt as 'Miss Percival' and it struck him as surprising as her cigarette that at her mature age she should be unmarried and bear the same name as himself.

Tea had been taken not merely to refresh Miss Percival but also to pass the time until Mr Percival should wake and she could see him, whereupon she disappeared from Alan's orbit and he returned to his occupations quite as though she had never descended on them from her remote world. How vast the house seemed that enabled the three worlds of his father, Nellie and himself to exist at this moment without impinging on each other. He sat on the nursery floor, on the patent green covering that he had heard his father more than once point out to be washable, hard-wearing, and yet warm to the touch. He set up his soldiers. When he planted on their oblong bases some foot-soldiers in Highland costume, rather heavier and taller than their Sassenach fellows, he was impelled to give a little sniff as each man took his place—a sniff that seemed to express at once his own mastery, admiration and solitariness.

He thought of the week and three days that separated him from Christmas morning, willing the period to slide away, disappear, imagining it doing so. Since he had frequently hinted that he would like Santa Claus to bring him a fort he was as confident of its eventual arrival as of Christmas itself, though in each case sufficient of doubt remained—as to Santa's omniscience and goodwill, as to time obeying its own rules in relation to this particular season—to make his looking forward excruciatingly keen. He saw Christmas as an occasion when normal feelings were replaced by other and ideal ones that would arouse the intensest pleasure, so that even the irritable Nellie, usually out of sympathy in particular with the formidable disarray of his soldiers, might well bring out her meagre purse from between the folds of the harsh night-dresses in her attic bedroom's chill and buy him a Howitzer. Nor did the recollection, as he played, of what his mother had over tea reported to Miss Percival his father as recently saying—that he longed to be merely as well as when he was still up—detract from the felicitous anticipation of Christmas, for no disaster could be imagined that could take from anybody, even his father, the ecstasy of receiving presents.

Before Christmas came Nurse Gill took up residence in the house and a fresh epoch started. Meals were restored almost to their own formality, with Nurse Gill attentive to Alan's behaviour and his mother's appetite. Nurse Gill reported to Alan every day whether his father was not so well or a little better, and her dominion extended to the kitchen regions where she governed the way a tray should be set or her cuffs and waistband starched. Alan found himself, with the rest, doing things he would previously never have dreamed of doing, such as eating the fat on meat.

It became apparent that Nurse Gill's stay would extend beyond Christmas, threatening to ruin Alan's pleasure like a guest who calls when a family is about to embark upon some traditional game. Perhaps it was to try to circumvent this alien presence that when he awoke on Christmas morning and felt the weight of the pillowslip constricting the movement

of his feet, he rose and groped in the dark up the attic stairs to Nellie's bedroom. Her humped shape confronted him like an example of some lower order of life whose mouth- and anus-ends cannot easily be distinguished. He said several times: 'May I open my pillowcase, Nellie?' and at last a grunt of assent was forthcoming. He found that on his way back to his bedroom he was not at all afraid of the presences that might lurk in the darkness, concentrating as he was on the happiness that awaited him. How remarkable, even after the annunciatory evidence of the previous night—the production of a clean starched pillowcase, the seeming impossibility of ever falling asleep—that this should be the anticipated morning. Since it was dark and cold and his father still lay ill, it might be supposed to be any morning, and it required all of the pillowslip's enormous riches to convince him, in his solitariness, otherwise.

He had played for some time when his mother, still wearing a dressing-gown, came into the room and complained bitterly that he should be up and acquainted with what Santa Claus had brought.

'Nellie said I could open it,' he answered, and the slightly disingenuous words served to divert his mother's wrath from him.

'It's the first time we've missed seeing you open your pillowcase,' she said with a sadness that seemed to him not wholly warranted. He went on playing, as much to convince her of the pleasure he had found in his presents as to conceal his embarrassment at the revelation of her feeling. 'I shall tell Nellie about it,' she added, picking up the pillowslip (now like a deflated balloon, limp but showing the strains of its former size) almost automatically to make sure that all its contents had been discovered. 'She should have had more sense.'

When his mother had gone away he wondered, since she had used the plural, whether, if he had not gone so early up to Nellie but let the day take a course unaffected by his will, his father would have risen and come to the bedroom to witness the discovery of Santa's bounty—if this day was not,

in fact, the very day appointed (and not inappropriately) by fate on which his father should be so much 'better' as to start once again to lead a normal life. How idle a thought this was was soon proved by Nurse Gill's bustling appearance with some towel-covered vessel and the morning visit, quite as though it were an ordinary day, of Dr Lindsay.

Two easy chairs were placed back to back, a yard apart, against the wall, and against the space between them a row of identical upright chairs arranged in a line. One rug was used to make a roof between the two easy chairs: the other half walled-in the passageway formed by the legs of the upright chairs. Alan crawled down the passageway to the small dark cave between the easy chairs and soon after had to contort his limbs to make room for Joan. 'We ought to get another rug and hang it on the backs of the chairs and cut off the *other* side of the passage,' he said.

'I certainly don't like that passage being open,' she said.

'No.'

'The trouble is we haven't got another rug, I know, and I bet Ma wouldn't let us have a blanket,' said Joan. They were at her house and the game was being played in the drawing-room—an indulgence Alan would not have expected nor, indeed, approved of at home.

'The witch could easily see us coming in and out,' he said, speaking in Joan's presence with complete *sang froid* about this supernatural conception who in fact had been given by Joan an individual and frequently-seen shape by her attaching the cognomen to a lady who lived in Greenhead and who Alan happened to know was called Mrs Halliwell.

They had each taken into the cave a medicine bottle containing water and a bullet of liquorice, the latter through patient shaking having coloured and flavoured the water and acquired an unhealthy furred appearance like a dead goldfish. Joan tilted her bottle to her mouth and Alan followed suit: the liquid came in a lukewarm and frustratingly modest stream. 'Go and get's a fill-up,' said Joan, giving Alan her bottle.

In the kitchen Mrs Rhodes was stamping out circles of pastry with the rim of a tumbler. 'You'll spoil your dinners, you two,' she said, observing Alan's progress with the bottles to the tap, 'if you drink any more of that muck.'

'We're just having a fill-up,' Alan said, as though there were some impassable barrier between their stomachs and the liquid in the bottles.

As he skirted the table on his way out she asked him if he would eat with them. He played with the now discarded tumbler, patterned with her white finger-prints, the rim chalkily outlined, and wished he could stay but saying that he must return.

'If your mother says it's all right you can come back,' said Mrs Rhodes. 'But you'll have to go and ask soon because it's not far off ready.'

'Our Joan's playing with the new travelling rug,' said Phyllis, Joan's older and disagreeable sister, entering the kitchen and casting a sharp eye on the alien Alan and the ingredients of Mrs Rhodes's cooking.

'Well, I don't expect she's doing it any harm,' said Mrs Rhodes, brushing the flour off her plump forearms where it outlined the blonde hairs like frost on grass. 'Off you go, then, Alan. How is your father?'

'Rather better,' he said, using Nurse Gill's formula that he remembered from the previous day, and with gratitude, for it always seemed to him that his father's condition reflected his own virtue or responsibility.

He told Joan of the invitation and put on his overcoat. In the pocket his hand closed on the tin dagger with the retractable blade that Mrs Platt had imaginatively produced for him at Christmas, and he gave himself two or three deep wounds. Frost still lingered in the crotches between roofs and chimneys. As he came out of the front gate a boy passed called Eric Godby, a faintly menacing figure from the highest form at school, who said: 'Is there anybody dead at your house?'

'No,' said Alan, at once.

'The blinds are all down,' said Eric Godby, continuing on his way.

'They're spring-cleaning,' said Alan, with masterly invention, for he seemed to remember that the process did somehow involve some eccentric behaviour with the blinds, and since Christmas was positively past the term did not seem to him outrageously inaccurate. Indeed, the need to convince Eric Godby of the conventionality of whatever went on at home operated almost to convince himself, so that he went for a step or two wondering if the carpets this year would be hung across the clothes-line and beaten. But Eric Godby's remark had really come as no shock since he had long known that his father was to die.

Instead of using the side entrance he went to the main gate and verified that the blinds were in truth down. He walked round to the back door, noticing that his scooter was still where he had left it, that Mrs Platt could be descried through the scullery window, that in fact no great change appeared to have come over the house. As he went into the kitchen Mrs Platt called to him: 'Your poor father's dead.'

'I know,' he said.

He left his cap in the hall but did not trouble to take off his overcoat before going into the drawing-room. He was not surprised to see his grandmother as well as his mother sitting by the fire and his grandfather standing between them, for he recalled their appearance on the evening of that distant day when his father had gone for the operation. Here it was assumed that he was acquainted with what had happened, for when he went up to his mother and she took him in her arms she wept and said nothing, and it was not for some moments that his grandmother said: 'You'll have to look after your mother, Alan.'

He waited patiently in his mother's embrace until he had at last the opportunity of saying what he had come in to say: 'Can I have dinner at the Rhodes?' The word 'dinner' slipped out, perhaps because the unusual circumstances of the moment encouraged him to repeat Mrs Rhodes's usage, but he realized immediately that it mattered not, for since his father was dead there was no one to remind him that the meal was properly called luncheon.

It turned out that though he did not return that morning, later in the day a bag was packed with his pyjamas and slippers and so forth to 'enable him actually to stay at the Rhodes'. It seemed extraordinary that merely for him to go across the road one of the bags should have to be got off that normally accompanied them on their holiday. Incongruous, too, the excitement that possessed him as he left his own house where today nothing could be done—not even the eating of the chocolates produced by his grandfather after lunch—to bring pleasure. He could not help imagining how when some such hour as eight should be reached that evening, instead of being parted from Joan by the command of her mother or his own guilty consciousness of the time, he would enjoy with her the tactical procrastinations of going to bed and be able, at whatever hour he awoke the following morning, to re-establish contact with her at will.

Had Mr and Mrs Rhodes not reminded him of it by their solicitousness he would perhaps have forgotten the reason for his being away from home. Living with the Rhodes disclosed many fascinating strangenesses of their lives hidden from the mere visitor—that for breakfast Mr Rhodes had fried potatoes with his bacon and egg, for instance, and that every Tuesday the whole family went to the Imperial Cinema. The two girls had identical dolls of fashionable aspect which they kept in cigar boxes: Mrs Rhodes quite soon produced for Alan a cigar box containing a doll of similar characteristics though naturally of rather less elaborate dress and articulation, and Alan was not ashamed to take this manikin to his heart, especially as he saw that Joan had been willing to exempt hers from her general condemnation of girlish activities. There was further evidence of Mrs Rhodes's indulgence when she made no adverse comment upon observing, as she folded up his clothes one night, that he had got himself into a pickle—the result, he found it impossible to explain to her or to himself, of being too absorbed, or diffident, or embarrassed to leave even for the necessary few minutes the game of New-market they had played during the evening.

His response to such indulgence was to continue to play

out for all he was worth the conception that his circumstances were no different from anyone else's. Even being seen by a casual caller at the Rhodes' required that he should account for his presence by a furious display of nonchalance or concentration *vis-à-vis* whatever occupation he was caught at. It seemed to him most necessary to prove to others that his being selected as fate's victim perturbed him not the least—nor must it inspire in *them* any sense of guilt or pity. Again, since his life prior to his father's death had been safe and uneventful he believed that those were the proper characteristics of all life which it behoved him to continue to have applied to his own.

How easy it was at the Rhodes' to believe in, to contribute to, this conception of the pleasurable nature of existence! On Sunday Mrs Rhodes laid out on the dinner table three crackers left over from the Christmas supply. Joan and Phyllis each found in theirs, in addition to a paper hat, an item of jewellery which, though obviously made merely from gilt wire and coloured glass, was strange and desirable. In Alan's cracker was a toy mirror, but far from showing any dismay at extracting this from the curl of cardboard in the cracker's crêpe paper, he cried excitedly: 'Look, it's got a handle. I'll get a piece of cotton and tie it to Caroline for her to use'—Caroline being the name given to his cigar-box-dwelling doll. He himself was not totally unconscious of the strain and feebleness of this remark, though even Phyllis forebore to criticize it.

But eventually he had to go home—to enter the house with his bag and be embraced by his mother whom he was startled to find dressed entirely in black, as though in his absence she had joined an organization that required her to wear a uniform. His grandparents were there—had perhaps been there ever since his father's death—but his grandmother had already put her hat on ready to leave, and soon he was left with his mother. Though nothing had changed in the house's appearance and Nellie's footsteps could be momentarily heard in the hall, he sensed a make-shift and short-handed air—a feeling of impending change and merely temporary comfort as

strong as though they were just waiting for the removal men.

When his mother left the drawing-room to superintend the getting of his bed-time milk and biscuits he lolled back in an easy chair, sullen, lethargic, wishing to make evident the lack of occupation and interest in this house compared with the Rhodes'. His eyes fell on the picture called 'The Harvest Moon' which he remembered his father buying. It depicted an evening scene, a large low moon and a frieze of agricultural workers homeward bound, prominent among whom were a strapping and handsome young man and woman, walking in a classical embrace. He recalled the reasons his father had given him for admiring the picture—the reasons for admiring any picture, for buying pictures and hanging them in one's drawing-room at all. It seemed anomalous that this object should stay behind after his father had gone, that its protagonists should remain so healthy, enamoured and happy.

But the question of whether his father had gone in fact came up for him disquietingly when he went to bed and passed the door of the bedroom that for the past months had been the arena of Mr Percival's illness, for though he realized that after death there is a funeral he was by no means certain that such an event had actually yet taken place in his father's case. He had been at the Rhodes' only a few days—time enough, certainly, for the funeral to have happened, but also sufficiently fleeting to make it unlikely that the necessary elaborate cabinet-making, transport and interment had been achieved. He flew into his own bedroom, switched on the light and when he was undressed forbore to go out into the landing again to visit the bathroom. He left the light on, knowing his mother would visit him and turn it off for him when she left and he was safely under the bedclothes. It did not occur to him to ask her if there had been a funeral, for that business seemed naturally to have taken its place in the broad spectrum of matters which could never be discussed between them.

In the dark he kept his eyes shut even though his head was

deep down in the clothes. He imagined his father rising from his bed in the nearby room and coming into this room. In the moment of fear it seemed to Alan that being dead did not debar his father from walking about—indeed, he realized that such motion was characteristic of apparitions, one of which his father had pathetically become. Moreover, though he had always been frightened of ‘ghosts’, he had never before understood that their power to terrify resided not in an anonymous, amorphous whiteness but in their possessing the veritable features of the living. He knew that if his father appeared it would be not in the unshaven, emaciated shape of Alan’s last memory of him, nor even as the pallid sufferer in the back of the Lanchester, but as himself—vigorous, enterprising, severe. It was the death not of an ill but of a normal man that was sinister and haunting.

Of course, when, the next day, he knew for a fact that the funeral had taken place (that the space of time he had been at the Rhodes’ had even been sufficient for Miss Percival to make again the journey from Aberdeen and back) he could scarcely reconstruct his fears, and his nights reverted to their old unspecific alarms. Passing the bedroom soon after, he found the door ajar, and glimpsed through the aperture an empty, neatly-made bed and a table at its side cleared of everything except the impersonality of a lamp. It was not long before it required a virtuous and consciously sentimental effort to remember that his father had existed at all.

Though the house had seemed empty without his father and Nurse Gill, he did not really feel a sense of solitude until the day he came back from school to find that his mother had gone to the nursing home. Mrs Platt no longer worked for them: she had disappeared with the Lanchester and for the same reason—that such an amenity could no longer be afforded! Nellie gave him tea and then returned to the kitchen fire, where she squinted at the double columns of small print of her paper-backed novelette. In the hearth she had put his woollen gloves to dry: they were saturated from his ‘making snowballs on his way home. He dug extravagantly deep into

the syrup tin which had appeared informally on the table as on the occasion of those breakfasts here before his father died, and not for the first time thought that really one didn't need gloves for snowballing, remembering how the modest protection they gave against the first touch of the snow changed almost at once to sopping frigid discomfort which only went where one's hands began to glow through the action of snowballing itself, and returned when it was over.

He observed something incongruous next to the drying gloves. 'Nellie,' he said, 'you've got my mother's slippers on.' No reply came, and he added: 'Didn't she want them to wear in the nursing home?'

'She took the ones she got for Christmas,' Nellie said without looking up from the page.

'So you both wear the same size?'

'I take smaller than her. My mother had a small foot. All the Duxburys had small feet.'

'Shall we play halma after tea?'

'No.'

'Go on.'

'I've something better to do nor play halma,' said Nellie, putting the novelette under the cushion of her chair and coming to the table to gather the tea things vigorously together.

In the nursery he got out the halma set with a view to playing a match with himself, but the game all at once lost its fascination. He saw that the fire had never been lit, and went back to the kitchen. He sat on a stool and watched Nellie ironing, the light shining through her frizzy hair and occasionally glinting on the glass of her spectacles. A coal on the fire emitted a stream of gas with a long high note into which broke the irregular thudding of the iron. There was a dauntingly high pile of clothes for Nellie to get through before she could be free to consider again the suggestion of a game. She attacked it as though merely passing the time and not the prospect of demolishing it were her motive.

'It's time you were going to bed,' Nellie at last remarked.

He demurred, and after some discussion gained sufficient respite to take him, he estimated, to the bottom of the clothes

to be ironed. When this moment came he did not immediately raise again the question of a game but proposed to let a minute or two go by in which she should become suitably reorientated towards pleasure and he should not appear to be promptly importunate. However, in that interim, instead of putting away the iron and ironing sheet she went to the scullery and returned with another batch of wrinkled shirts and napkins grey with damp.

'Are you going to do those, too?' he asked.

'I don't expect anyone else is.'

'Oh sod it.'

Nellie put down her iron. 'You wouldn't swear if your father was alive.'

'That's not swearing,' Alan said, with bold uncertainty.

'You know it's swearing.'

'"Sod" just means a piece of grass.'

'I shall tell your mother what you said.'

'Tell tale tit.'

'And of your impudence.' Nellie took up the iron again and brushed the hair off her brow. 'I've no need to stand here and be insulted, you know. And it's past your bedtime, so be off.'

Realizing that a game was impossible and that bed could not be postponed, he devoted the last minutes of his time downstairs to inveigling Nellie to come upstairs with him, but since he had long won the right to undress and wash without supervision and did not wish to reveal to her that his longing for her company was solely to guard him against the terrors of the dark, his purpose was clothed in language ambiguous and unpersuasive. He scurried through his preparations, got between the sheets and turned off the light as though the pleasures of reading in bed were unknown to him. A feeling of frightening isolation seized him in the dark, as of an animal left behind by the onward-travelling herd. Even the familiar Nellie seemed from a different and irrelevant species. He thought not of his mother—to have her rejoin him was too much to ask—but of Miss Percival, whose severe and mysterious personality was rendered desirable by her bearing his name. He had saved a biscuit from his statutory supper

allowance and brought it to bed with him. It seemed to him that though he might be forgotten by the world this slightly rough and scalloped disc that he held gently between his palms as though it were a bird would save him from extinction. He broke a bit off—the minimum he judged necessary to keep him going—and ate it cautiously, letting his saliva make an abundant slime of it. Hunger soon made him withdraw the rest of the biscuit from under the pillow and take another morsel, and then another, but his imagination succeeded in inflating these brief intervals to the days of semi-starvation he had initially envisaged, and with the whole biscuit eventually inside him he told himself that he was equipped to stand an endless siege.

It was not Nellie who awoke him, but his grandmother, who miraculously appeared fully dressed by his bedside at so early an hour that she had switched on the light instead of drawing back the curtains. He was genuinely shocked when she took him in her arms and told him that his mother was dead. Feeling her cheek wet against his, he began to cry himself: the play was so realistically poignant that his own acting rose marvellously to it. His grandmother said: 'Your poor little brother's dead, too.' The news—the dénouement—added nothing to his emotion except a sense that it was not entirely unexpected, since he realized that had he bothered to ratiocinate he had known all along of this potential advent and would not have desired it otherwise. Indeed, what struck him most was that like Mrs Platt his grandmother had applied to the dead the adjective 'poor', and though in the case of his father he had come, because of the disappearance of the Lanchester and the talk of selling the house, to realize its aptness, he could not imagine how it applied to a baby—until its lack of pockets, the necessary meagreness of its Saturday allowance, and so forth, had after a little reflection come home to him.

His grandmother eventually left him, with instructions to dress. He thought of one of the outings during his father's illness. The car had been held up behind a line of traffic on a country road. At length Williams had got out to investigate.

Alan had followed suit and run on to where a circle of watching people evidently marked the epicentre of the hold-up. Moving among legs and skirts he came to a woman lying on the road, her head almost touching his shoe, bloody, inhuman. A moment later Williams hauled him out and took him back to the car and, still grasping his hand, told his mother and father of the accident and the dead woman, adding: 'And there was this young gentleman on the front row.' He had wanted to say but could not that had he known that something horrible had been hidden in that circle he would not have penetrated it. It was like the time that he had seen a cat in the garden covering up something in a flower bed with its paw: knowing of a dog's propensity to hide a valued bone, he had been curious to discover what a clever cat thought fit to store safely away. How astonished he had been when his digging hand had encountered evil-smelling softness!

On completing his dressing he did not, as he normally did, leap down to breakfast, but stood about the bedroom, knowing the hour to be earlier than usual, wondering if he was to go to school, dubious of the correct procedure in this extraordinary situation. He lifted the curtain to one side for a moment—he did not care to do more because for all he knew it had to remain drawn in order to signal the fact of his mother and brother's deaths to the outside world—and saw the moon casting a mauve sickliness on the snow. He wondered if he would be able to snowball again today or whether his bereavement might not debar him from such pleasures.

He understood clearly that a person's death meant in a day or so that person's permanent disappearance and that this was so even though death were not the obvious result of a crushed skull in a motoring accident but merely a rumour reported by Mrs Platt or his grandmother. And yet in his mother's case he could not believe that she would not in due course appear to him again—flushed and excited, as it might be, in his bedroom on a brief visit from a party below, or returning from some expedition which had excluded his father.

II

When he had gone to live with his grandparents he never once returned to Greenhead, not because of its remoteness (though it was true that to get there one had to change trams in the town centre) nor precisely because his life was all contained in the district of Garside where his grandparents' house was situate: it was rather as though such facts had combined to confirm a spiritual conviction that Greenhead was henceforth to be sacred or haunted or shameful ground. Nor was he given many reasons to remember the life formerly carried on at Greenhead. Almost at once Nellie disappeared as effectively as if she were dead, and in the summer he changed his school. As the months passed he found that his parents were even more forgotten by others than by himself. Sometimes his grandmother or an uncle or aunt would refer to his mother, though never in connection with his own loss. Her name was used almost as though it were a proof of the utterer's courage or commonsense or well-controlled tenderness or lack of superstition. No one seemed to mention his father except his grandfather who might say, refusing some emaciated and foreshortened weed proffered by Uncle Arthur: 'Carl spoiled my taste for cheap cigars.' For Mr Wrigley as well as for Alan the name evidently had its distinctive and exotic overtones because even after several years he brought it out without attaching to it a surname or any other explanation of its owner's identity.

Though in the journey from Greenhead to Garside one went down several hills—levelling out principally at the railway bridge and station and the town hall and market place—Garside was by no means on the town's lowest level. The Wrigleys' house looked over a small park beyond whose perimeter could be seen the smoke-haze of houses in a positive valley, while the tram route continued past the house in a series of curving descents to a district of mills and slums where

the cobbled main street gave Alan the sense of its being so low as to be permanently dark and under water. Even a tram stop beyond, the houses began to have their front doors opening directly on the street—at first with thresholds neatly outlined in ‘donkey stone’ but soon of more irregular respectability until finally some childish and grubby posterior might be nakedly seen as its owner crawled on the pavement while in the doorway of another house a boy capable of standing upright would be absently holding a piece of bread in one hand and his member in the other. Here was the square of cottages whose name, Brierley Court (through his grandmother’s adjectival and scornful use of it), was for Alan synonymous with his own bad behaviour, and the public house whose customers’ male song and female laughter were sometimes actually heard passing the Wrigleys’ house late at night. Against the wall of this public house and of a nearby warehouse there squatted during the day a number of collarless and cloth-capped men whom Alan identified with the spoken-of ‘unemployed’, perhaps on strike or, as seemed latterly more likely, locked-out—mysterious terms from which anything sinister was removed by the pleasantly idle state of their ‘victims’.

One of the workless was Jim, the husband of Mary, the Wrigleys’ daily woman. Jim’s occupation was not the comparatively harmless one of leaning against the pub wall but of belonging to what his wife called ‘the Arguers’—a group of men who congregated in a certain shelter in the park opposite the Wrigleys’, there to discuss party politics and the meaning of the universe. During the years of Alan’s stay at his grandparents’ he had not failed to gather that political life, both local and national, was being very seriously invaded by the Socialists, whom Alan, like his grandfather, initially regarded with fear and horror. But it was not long before Mr Wrigley, as his personal knowledge of some of the local figures grew, habitually remarked, when the Socialists were mentioned, ‘they’re clever fellows’, in the tone he might have used about some rather revoltingly agile acrobat. And when last year the Socialists had actually formed the Government of England, it could be seen that they were not so clever as Mr Wrigley

had imagined, for they had evidently not been incubating any revolutionary plan but (Mr Wrigley admitted) merely training themselves to continue the traditional working of authority. Jim was without employment under both the Conservatives and the Socialists, but at 'the Arguers' he now had to defend that state, since he was one of those who had voted in the new régime. Despite his unreliable politics, Jim was sometimes invited to the house to clean out the drains or whitewash the outbuildings, and on the first of these occasions Alan was surprised to find, instead of a shifty, simian, 'clever fellow', a great red-faced booby present himself at the back door.

But Jim, Alan thought, undoubtedly owed his rubicund health to the food Mrs Wrigley gave to Mary to take to him, for most of the unemployed—most of the town's population, in fact—were small and pale, and not a few had bow-legs or wry-necks. Their pallor was not that of ill-health but of an inferior variety of humanity. They were like the deformed and anaemic fruit that survives at the bottom of a dish. That these creatures had minds and emotions of ordinary characteristics had surprisingly been proved to him early in his life at Garside when accompanying his grandfather to the office they had passed a beshawled and toothless female or a man toddling on legs as foreshortened as in some *tour de force* of draughtsmanship who had greeted them in terms recognizably human albeit shockingly uncultivated. To the 'Ow do, Mr Wrigley,' or, even, 'Ow do, Tom,' Mr Wrigley replied in a suitably assumed proletarian accent and when the other had passed would, in response to Alan's questioning, explain his or her identity.

Mr Wrigley's office was called the Garside Estate Office and this legend appeared on the two rather dusty brown translucent screens that had been fitted into the lower parts of the windows. Mr Wrigley was the Clerk to the Garside Trustees, a title Alan found ambiguous and mysterious, for the clerk at the office was in fact an elderly man called Mr Aspinall who sat behind the counter in the front room and whose menial status was denoted by his rising at the entrance of Mr

Wrigley and his wearing a black alpaca jacket evidently bought at an even more diminutive epoch of his life.

The office was situate among Garside's most thickly clustered shops but Mr Wrigley despised them all. Hence Mr Aspinall had to take a not inconsiderable walk into the the town's main shopping centre to obtain for Mr Wrigley the prize cheese, the fresh soles, the new English lamb, that he insisted on. In these absences of Mr Aspinall, Mr Wrigley himself was sometimes forced to emerge from the inner office to speak to a caller and even, if Mr Aspinall's journey for delicacies were particularly prolonged, to write out a receipt in his slow copperplate hand. Where Mr Wrigley normally passed his time seemed remote from cash and receipt books and the undistinguished tenantry of Garside—a dark quiet room looking out on a small paved yard where the lavatory was, which for paper had ancient copy letters, their ink blurred and purple, which Mr Aspinall could sometimes be seen slicing in two for this purpose. On Mr Wrigley's desk, besides his inkwell and pens, were a tin for nibs with Lord Kitchener's portrait in bas relief on the lid and a pair of miniature clogs.

Alan still found these objects worthy of examination when he visited his grandfather's office, but it was a measure of his emergence from childhood that he could regard with complete indifference the device for punching holes in the ledger sheets that once he had used with inexhaustible pleasure to make 'confetti' out of the different coloured scraps of paper that Mr Aspinall had been set to find for him. So too it was not merely that eventually he grasped that it would be pointless at certain seasons of the year to ask Mr Wrigley to tap with his stick on a certain paving stone in a certain street on their way to the office to make a file of ants emerge but also that in the end he ceased to wish with any fervency to see them emerge at all.

Without his Uncle George the life of the house seemed amateurish. Even Alan's moving into the bedroom lately occupied by his uncle could not compensate for the lack of potential excitement that was positively to be felt—not least

by his grandmother whose 'baby', as she said, Uncle George was, despite the cause of his defection being his marriage. One Saturday afternoon not long after this ceremony Mrs Wrigley remarked, as she stood looking out of the dining-room window over the park, that she wondered what George was doing. Alan was sitting at the table whose blue plush cloth he had folded back so as to be able conveniently to set out his painting things on the bare scrubbed wood of the table top. He carefully laid in an inch of wash before saying, as he rattled his brush in the cup of water: 'Why, Grannie?'

'Because I hope he's doing something sensible—relaxing or getting some fresh air.'

Ignoring the manifestly absurd or irrelevant content of this statement, he said: 'Why don't you go and find out?'

His grandmother laughed briefly in a pleased way and then said: 'I've a good mind to.'

It seemed to him remarkable that there should be this parley on the matter, since Uncle George, on his marriage, had moved into a house not ten minutes' walk away.

'Don't put the brush in your mouth, Alan,' Mrs Wrigley added.

He accepted the rebuke with equanimity since he himself could not help regarding the operation as one not unlikely to lead to death from poisoning, though occasionally to be indulged in so as to get the finest point on one's brush and also perversely to savour the wet, faintly metallic taste of the paint water. 'It's terribly hard,' he said, of the problem of his painting, though his being able to utter this remark indicated his mastery of the problem and his pleasure at what he had already got down on paper. The rapid tergiversations of the creative mood were illustrated when a few minutes later, on his grandmother telling him to put on his hat and coat, he abandoned with relief what he suddenly saw as his quite unrealistic painting and his muddy, rebellious materials. 'Where are we going?' he asked.

'To see your Uncle George, of course. Isn't that what you wanted?'

Yes, he thought, imagining his amusement at some comic business his uncle was certain to involve them in, but realizing that his anticipation of pleasure, almost as keen as if his grandmother had announced that they were going to the pictures, was prompted by the prospect of being with his Aunt Iris. He had found it exciting to be in her company from the days when his uncle had taken him to visit her on Sunday afternoons and they would walk briskly through the quiet streets, his uncle carrying gloves and wearing a trilby hat whose brim was of a bound and inflexible type, and occasionally making a remark of startling intimacy, such as: 'Iris can't stand the sight of blood.' They had to walk past the shuttered shop-window to an alley which led to the rear. As surprising as a familiar quotation in *Hamlet* was the name MIDDLETON on the fascia board above the shop—Iris's name. In the room behind the shop Mr Middleton would be reading a Sunday newspaper of smaller page size than those taken at any house Alan had previously known, and occasionally spitting in the fire which being set high in a kitchen range as black and massive as a locomotive was peculiarly convenient for the purpose. Mrs Middleton would come from the scullery, wiping her hands on her pinafore, her unabundant hair subsumed in a halo of metal curlers, giving her the appearance of the Medusa. Sooner or later she would say to Alan: 'Do you want an orange, love?' and on his assenting: 'Go and get one from the shop, then, love.'

The door leading to the shop had in its upper part two panels of plain glass but they admitted little illumination to the shop across whose greyness, in fact, could be seen thin shapes of brilliant daylight coming from the cracks and knot-holes in the shutters of the window. As he penetrated into the shop, Mrs Middleton's voice dying away behind him, Alan could not help succumbing to a feeling of unease. Against the walls were bent sacks like obese, shot men. Crepitations, as of rats' feet, continued to come from under the shelves of vegetables, though he stamped his heels heavily on the worn floor. A cardboard effigy of a negro, intended by some organization of fruit growers to lend a jolly association to

their product, peered with disturbing realism over a pile of cabbages.

Alan found a mound of oranges, seized one, and, his eyes now become used to the gloom, ran back to the safety and potentiality of the Middletons' living-room. This, despite the glass-panelled door, did not immediately assume its true character, for its part nearest to the shop contained not furniture but orange-boxes, trays of lettuce, cartons of malt vinegar, dusty sacks, and only gradually did these give way to the more normal objects of a living-room, such as a bird cage, a horse-hair sofa, a gramophone. This last, sandwiched between two white lace doilys, surmounted by a silver-framed, coloured photograph of Iris as a child and supported by a music cabinet, was occasionally playing when Alan and his uncle arrived—its lid raised (the photograph and topmost doily laid on the sofa) and its little doors open to a sound of martial music. Mr Middleton, showing unusual animation, would be conducting this from his chair. When the record had ended and his wife had switched the machine off, he would say: 'Black Dykes Band. Best ut lot.' Nobody challenging this statement, he returned to his newspaper.

When Alan had removed the first small disc of skin from his orange he paused, hoping Mrs Middleton would invite him to take a lump of sugar to press in the hole. This was by no means unlikely, since there was a bowl of sugar lumps on the table, together with the other impedimenta of tea, for the Middletons, as unusual in their habits as in their dwelling, each drank a large cup of this beverage immediately after their midday meal.

At last footsteps could be heard coming down the stairs (which ran close to one wall of the living-room) and Iris appeared, dressed for the street and buttoning her gloves, perhaps with some new garment on, such as the navy blue 'costume' Alan so admired that even when Iris complained of its picking up the 'bits' he saw in those specks of white lint only equally mysterious fragments of her mysterious sleeping quarters. From beneath her hat, on each side of her face, two pieces of hair protruded whose qualities Alan could not help

thinking the direct opposite of her mother's since these were noticeably fluffy. Iris brought into the room the scent of her face powder.

As the three of them marched off for the walk which it was not only essential but pleasurable to take to fill in the gap until they could return to the Wrigleys' house for tea, it seemed to Alan almost as though he, equally with his uncle, was 'courting' Iris. The conversation at first usually concerned Iris's parents and it never failed to add gravity to his steps and mien to hear her complain that Mr Middleton was 'terrible', having, say, objected to her buying the dog's-head brooch that she wore in the lapel of her costume coat, and made a scene about it. Neither she nor Uncle George lowered their voice during these serious disclosures, as would other adults in his presence on such an occasion. Sometimes the illusion of his opinions and actions counting in the world was so strong that he was emboldened to make a remark. He said once: 'I'd hide all the gramophone needles, the used ones as well.'

'Why would you hide all the gramophone needles, the used ones as well?' asked Uncle George.

'So he couldn't play the gramophone.'

'And what's that got to do with tripe?'

'To pay him back for what he did to Iris.'

'He's a genius, this lad. Used ones as well.' And his uncle hooked the handle of his stick round Alan's neck and ran along with him until they turned and looked back and saw Iris stepping daintily by herself along a cinder path that skirted the wall of the Sudan Mill whose high red-brick chimney reeled against the cloudy sky.

The wall eventually gave way to a hedge, the path descended and ceased to be cindered, and they were in the most interesting part of their walk between the two houses, where cows could be seen and a few low trees climbed. If the ground were dry they sometimes made a detour to a pond in the middle of a field. One Sunday Alan went down the bank to the edge of the still water and, finding a number of frogs, communicated his discovery to the others. They stood above and away from

him, linking arms, suddenly perversely adult and remote, talking of other things. 'There're hundreds of them,' he cried, trying by hyperbole to shock them into a proper interest. Neither descended. Alan called up: 'There's one on another's back,' but the excitement of communicating this extraordinary behaviour died in an instant as he saw a look pass between George and Iris denoting their prior knowledge, greater insight, and pity for his own ingenuousness, and all at once their love turned into something that he could not share and of which he did not approve.

Their marriage conventionalized that love and made it incapable of hurting or embarrassing him, and curiously enough the fact of his uncle now being able to monopolize Iris seemed to leave her with opportunity to pay special attention to her newly-acquired nephew. So that he set out with his grandmother in full confidence of Iris's re-acknowledgement of some private and unique relationship between them.

However, on his grandmother's ringing the bell of the little pebble-dashed house—a toylike house, as befitting a couple whose married life seemed as yet little more than playing at the thing—and there being no reply, Alan felt a desperate sense of disappointment, and of tracts of Iris's life far beyond his control.

'Go round the back,' said his grandmother. 'They may be in the garden.'

He went through the side gate and the wind slammed it behind him. The garden was empty but he walked the few steps to the end of it and looked fruitlessly in the shed. As he turned round to come back he saw a slight movement of the bedroom curtain but he did not stare up or falter in his footsteps. When he joined his grandmother he shook his head. She gave the bell a short push, as though administering a *coup de grâce*, and turned immediately to walk away. They were not half-way down the path when the door opened and George called them back. He gave his mother a wrestler's embrace, just as though he had never been married, and said: 'We were putting some things away in the cock loft. Iris thought she heard the bell. Had you been ringing long?' He

forbore to ruffle Alan's hair or pull out his tie, but addressed him with seriousness, and Alan had no doubt that his uncle was displeased with him for peeping at the bedroom window. On the other hand, when Iris appeared she was especially affectionate to him, putting her arm round his shoulders, an arm whose nudity made him realize the imminence of summer. And on her suggesting that they had a cup of tea she took him with her into the kitchen where he saw, not among the empty jam jars of the wash-house as heretofore but surrounded by the dishes of what had evidently been the midday meal, the familiar porcelain tray of acid, and he marvelled at the freedom that had come to his uncle to bathe the plates for his etchings actually in the house.

'Shall we have some biscuits?' Iris asked him, quite as though his opinion was going to influence her in this department of existence in which he imagined she had complete control. They proved to be ginger nuts, an especial favourite of his, and he carried a plate of them into the sitting-room with as much pride as if he had been the host. In a way it all seemed to be merely a game of having tea, for not only was the meal of an unusual insubstantiality but the very crockery in which it was served partook of the diminutive over-brightness of a doll's tea-set and its evident newness proclaimed its owners' amateur status. Alan bit into a ginger nut and, surprised to find his teeth sinking into a limp softness, wondered where Iris had ingeniously found this rare variety of the species. While the adults talked he stirred his tea vigorously enough to make a maelstrom, to the centre of which, as it revolved slower and slower, the tea leaves gradually descended.

Though it was his grandmother who had determined on the visit and with unmistakable enthusiasm, she stood up and announced their departure with disappointing alacrity. Great tracts of talk and the afternoon were left behind them as they walked back through the park. So deformed seemed the day now that Alan felt no desire to watch the men playing bowls, or listen to 'the Arguers', but was impelled on to the empty unoccupation of home.

'Well, did you enjoy your tea?' said his grandmother after a long period of contemplative silence.

'Yes, grandma.'

'The biscuits were soft. She doesn't keep them in a tin.'

'I rather like them soft.'

'Do you like a lot of tea leaves floating on top of your cup?'

'No.'

'She doesn't have the water boiling.'

'Does that make the tea leaves come on top?' Alan asked, as though pedantic elucidation of his grandmother's meaning would somehow lessen Iris's offence.

'I don't know what George thinks of soft biscuits, I'm sure.'

'Perhaps *he* likes them soft.'

'He never had soft biscuits when he lived at home,' said Mrs Wrigley. 'And that house is a perfect muck-heap.'

Remembering the unwashed dishes in the kitchen, Alan was compelled to acknowledge that this word was scarcely too strong. It seemed to attach itself not only to the inanimate objects of the house but also to the person of Iris, so that her beauty was given a disgusting element and his admiration of it a venality. He wondered why he'd been incapable of observing all these things for himself, and thought depressedly what a foolish person he was.

His grandmother pulled down with the beige cotton-gloved fingers of one hand the tiny brim of her hat which the breeze was threatening to dislodge, and Alan actually heard the faint rattle of the cherries with which it was trimmed. 'A perfect muck-heap,' she repeated.

'She hadn't washed the dinner things,' he said. The pang for his treachery merged quickly into a malicious sense of virtue.

'What can you expect? She hasn't been brought up to know any better.'

'Mr Middleton spits in the fire,' said Alan, all at once seeing this action as prime evidence of the decadence of Iris's background.

It was only in the holidays that he ever found himself in this part of the town, though it was not very far from his grand-

parents' house. The scene was like a rarely visited and mysteriously attractive landscape in a dream, and the same compound of the familiar and strange. At the back of some low and rather broken-down factory buildings one walked across a piece of waste ground littered with coiled ribbons of metal, brown, silver or rusty, like severed hair. It was here that one began pleasurably to feel that one might be about to come across the stream, and in a few moments one was looking over the small valley, quite without buildings or people, that it seemed impossible to discover except by chance.

The stream debouched from a culvert of diameter so enormous that stooping one could walk into it as far as one's conviction of being able to return safely permitted. The water trickled along the base of the culvert through stones thrown in by more timid explorers. Alan reclined on the bank of the stream and, turning on one hip, pulled a rolled paper-backed book from his trousers pocket, folded back at his place. Though he had bought it less than an hour ago, already it was the part remaining to be read that threatened disintegration in his pocket. Most of it he had got through in a tram shelter by the newsagent's he had bought it from and only a gnawing sense of the ridiculously swift passage of his pleasure, of the dissipation of this part of his Saturday purchases, had driven him to walk out here. At first he read with exaggerated care, pausing at the end of each sentence, opening out the book so that he could see the lines' beginnings on the recto pages. But soon he was once more tearing through the narrative as though at the end of it would come the knowledge of the whereabouts of a vast treasure or the secret of life.

And yet it was not really the chases, the tyings-up, the biffs on the head—the active parts of the action—that gripped him most, but the ratiocinative passages, the domestic scenes, where Sexton Blake pondered in his dressing-gown or Tinker got up in the morning. These he searched for when he read the books again, their details immortally fresh, and quite unimportant the question of breaking up the international ring of jewel thieves.

Beyond the page he observed the progress towards him,

across the waste land, of a dog—the progress erratic in motion, variable in speed, and made with the nose constantly to the ground. When it seemed clear that despite keeping an imperfect look-out and direction the animal would pass close to him, Alan put his book in his pocket and rose cautiously to his feet. He had never had any intimate relations with dogs, and feared them—the more so since, on a recent occasion, when he was running innocently on an errand for his grandmother, a small black dog had emerged from a garden and, after running with him, barking, for a few yards, had nipped his leg through his ‘golf’ stocking.

The approaching dog reached Alan and found on the surrounding ground a spoor of great absorption. It failed to move on. Alan said, two or three times: ‘Good dog, then,’ and drew air between his lower lip and teeth in an attempt to make the juicy squeak through which the canine world could be reassured. To Alan’s surprise these actions appeared to have some effect for the dog’s tail wagged, though since the tail was carried high in a curl it was difficult to distinguish such a gesture from the trembling of the organ incident to its owner’s trotting. The tail was sand-coloured, like the rest of the pelt, and seemed like a coiled paring from the rear of the animal—the place below the anus from which the sliver could have been taken being indicated by a lighter colour and a vertical line as though the fur were slightly grooved there, as indeed it might have been.

Alan began to walk with careful lack of haste downstream. It soon became clear that the dog was following him. It lost or became bored with the scent on the ground and now moved with as much purpose as its diagonally-carried carcass could indicate. When Alan stopped the dog stopped. ‘Go home,’ he said without effect on two or three occasions. It could be seen that the dog’s hairy feet were very muddy and that its body was lean, perhaps excessively so. Its face had become familiar, its brown eyes and look were at once innocent and shifty. Since at the entrance to the culvert it had already come some distance, every step now was taking it disastrously far from its home. Possibly it had no home.

Alan became convinced that the dog was a stray and was following him for food. He made more strenuous efforts to send it away and then hid behind the fence of an abandoned chicken run to which place, however, the dog immediately and unhurriedly came. He walked further and then stopped, seized by the anxious sense that the dog was not only wasting its time but also its energy in following him. It was plain that the animal, in its neglected or errant state, had a strictly limited fund of vitality before the expenditure of which it must find food or die. He gazed upon its ill-planned movements, its panting even, with a feeling of pity so sharp that it brought tears to his eyes. 'Come on, old boy,' he said, the rough words designed to hide from the dog its proximity to doom as well as express by understatement his own tenderness.

They had walked so far from the stream that the backyards of a street of houses limited the dog's forays in one direction to a mere squirting of the numerous posts for clothes-lines. All at once it occurred to Alan—a brilliant increase in the horizon of his thought and action—that he could buy the dog something to eat. With excitement he turned down a passage between the houses and, coming into the street, saw almost at once the kind of shop that he imagined would sell dog biscuits. The problems of the transaction stabbed at his solar plexus: could dog biscuits be had for the few coppers that remained of his Saturday money; did one buy them by the ounce or the pound; what variety was suitable in this particular case?

'Do you keep dog biscuits?' he said to the shop-keeper in the end, though he knew that this formula had actually been made into the feed line of a joke, the response (whose impudent cleverness had made him smile when he had first read it) being: 'No, we sell them.'

The shop-keeper was not a reader of the jokes in comics or at any rate resisted the temptation to score. 'How many do you want?'

Conscious of the ears of other customers, his own burning, Alan asked: 'How much are they?'

'Fivepence a pound,' said the shop-keeper, as though this

were a fact of life it was moronic or eccentric to be ignorant of.

He did the arithmetic without hesitation and said: 'Half a pound, please.' He was astonished and heartened by their remarkable cheapness which enabled this not insubstantial measure to be bought comfortably out of the remains of his Saturday money and he felt a glow of gratitude towards the makers—to say nothing of the vendor—of this article for efforts which seemed to him almost charitable.

He carried what proved to be an awkwardly full and rather large bag to the waste land behind the shop. He put a handful of biscuits on the bare ground and called the dog. It paid some scant olfactory attention to the objects and then stood a yard or so off looking at some neutral part of the scene before it. He picked up a biscuit and, though fearing that his fingers might be bitten, held it out towards the dog, which indeed turned its head towards the nourishing cube. It was apparent that the dog was so starved as to be incapable of tackling these hard and sturdy objects which after all had been designed for healthy, cared-for animals. Alan wandered urgently over the vacant plot until he had found two stones. On the larger of the two he put a dog biscuit and prepared to break it with the smaller stone.

The dog, which for the last few moments had been lurking, in potential unreadiness, some way behind him, took this moment to trot briskly up. Evincing a far greater interest than hitherto, it put its nose to the biscuit on the anvil stone and Alan was unable to stop himself hitting the black, rather dry and rubberlike extremity a glancing blow with the stone in his hand. The dog yelped and went out of range. Alan was appalled at his lethal and treacherous action, albeit wholly innocent.

'Sorry, sorry,' he said. 'I didn't mean it. Now just stay there, just wait a minute.' Unhampered by the dog's nose, he quickly broke up a few biscuits. But not unnaturally the dog could not be persuaded to investigate them as they lay on the stone, and Alan had to take some fragments in his hand and carry them to the dog which, however, averted its face. Gazing

at the hard, sharp pieces, blackened in places by dirt from the stone which had been used to crumble them, he thought that it was no wonder the dog refused them. He would never be able to save it from starvation. The pathos of the situation—in which he included his own predicament—once again blurred the scene, and he stumbled blindly through it back to the stream, for it occurred to him that as a last resort he would moisten these too rigorous bits and make them into a pap such as he had himself when he was ill.

However, Alan had no more success with this notion than with his others. He suddenly realized—through the quality of the light, perhaps, or the volume of smoke from domestic chimneys, or the direction and number of the figures he could see in the distance—that it was late, that everyone was already having their midday meal, that his grandmother would be worried about him. The alien look of the landscape told him how far he was from home and implanted a worm of unease in his abdomen.

He set off, half running, calling to the dog. 'I'll take you with me,' he muttered, as grimly determined as Sexton Blake, thinking how pleased and touched his grandmother would be about his concern. But he had not reached the giant culvert before he realized that the dog had ceased to follow. It had stopped to examine exhaustively the dilapidated fence of the chicken run on which previously it had failed to bestow a single sniff. Alan waited as long as his anxious stomach permitted. Before he moved off he emptied the bag of dog biscuits on the grass in a strategic line, but his last glimpse of the dog over his shoulder showed it unconcernedly concentrating on the fence.

The hour at which his grandfather set off for work became later and later—not precisely through indolence on Mr Wrigley's part but because his morning routine grew almost imperceptibly more and more elaborate. For instance, in order not to keep breakfast waiting he had on several occasions come down without shaving or finishing dressing, but this in the end formed part of the ritual—a jacket partially concealed

the fact that he was shirtless; a coloured silk handkerchief, elaborately knotted, was worn round his neck; and on entering the dining-room he manifested his bearded state by rubbing his cheek against his wife's and greeting her with jocose loudness. That he had in fact been out of bed for some time was revealed by the sound from upstairs of his falsetto singing—usually some ballad by Tosti or the like; less frequently a comic song of his youth. His occupations in this pre-breakfast period were evidently not to do with his toilet: doubtless this was the time when, for example, he washed in soap and water all the loose change he had been given the previous day—for he had come from disliking the filthy copper and silver that had been through goodness knows who's hands to doing something practical about it.

Breakfast itself was for him a leisurely meal, not least because he had to cut his bacon up into minute fragments so that it could be masticated between his gums and the remaining pre-molar Alan's grandmother derisively called his 'pickle-chaser'—for meal times were in fact the occasions when contrary to reasonable expectation he did not wear his false teeth. After breakfast he went golfing—so he referred to his task of filling the coal scuttles from the coal shed, comparing his own leisure exercise with other men's in faint disparagement both of himself and them. On his way to 'golf' (and the term which began in jocularly had at last taken on an almost serious connotation, as though it had in reality a double meaning, one of which denoted Mr Wrigley's activity in the back yard) he passed a row of hooks in the rear part of the hall and fell into the habit of snatching up a hat to protect his balding head from any chill draughts there might be outside—often Alan's school cap but not impossibly some sombre velvet contraption of Mary's, for the habit in time lost much of its utilitarian purpose and served mainly to indulge Mr Wrigley's fantastic humour. At length Mrs Wrigley crocheted one or two woollen 'golfing hats' (the familiar term being again misleading, since they were headgear more suitable for ski-ing) which Mr Wrigley put on at the very outset of his morning's 'round'. Like all games, Mr Wrigley's 'golf' evolved

rules more and more elaborate: not the least time-consuming was the compulsion he grew to feel to fit the coal into the buckets and scuttles with the least possible interstices, as though the operation were a species of giant three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle.

Then came the business of washing and shaving and completing his dressing. In the winter he warmed the inside of his overcoat, his muffler and his hat, before putting them on. He also warmed the handle of his walking stick, but Alan appreciated that there was an ironical element in this action. Before leaving the house Mr Wrigley saw that he had in his overcoat pocket some clean coppers for his tram fare.

These and other ceremonies of the day were sadly deformed when Alan's Aunt Lottie and her son Charles came to stay. Perhaps the most serious matter was that Mr Wrigley found it difficult to get into the lavatory after breakfast owing to Charlie's tenancy of it. Alan overheard his grandfather complaining to his grandmother: 'He reads in there. That's what does it. He loses all sense of time. No one else in the house has a chance.' Other charges were added when Mrs Wrigley passed on this accusation to her daughter, an exchange which Alan also overheard, perhaps through Mrs Wrigley's design, for she never lost the opportunity of warning Alan about the proper conduct of life even though he might not at that moment have committed anything blameworthy. 'He lets his book lie on the floor and then he has to bend forward to read it and that means he soils the back of the pan.'

'It's not our Charlie,' said Aunt Lottie. 'I'm sure of that. He was always brought up to be most particular.'

'He doesn't pull the plug, either,' added Mrs Wrigley.

'Now that's not Charlie, I'm sure,' said Aunt Lottie, emphasizing the personal pronoun and thus removing from the statement any shadow of possibility that it might be erroneous. Alan marvelled that she challenged so resolutely his grandmother's accusations, for she was a slight pale woman with Mr Wrigley's thin, fine, gingerish hair, and normally of a martyred disposition. Her son, though not many years older than Alan, was as tall and stout as a man. His cuckoo-like

demands, fulfilled by his mother at first merely in the physical sphere, had grown as though in pursuance of the Marxist law about the 'superstructure' of economic society, to operate morally and spiritually. Though her complaining nature and proneness to misfortune had earned her the family cognomen 'poor Lottie'—the adjective having been at first attached in genuine compassion but eventually with automatic derision—she seemed to Alan of unpliant and wily character. 'A bit of the outside will do for Charlie,' she would say, or: 'Charlie'll just have a boiled egg'—and, extraordinarily, Charlie would soon be seen to have on his plate by far the best end of the bargain.

Like Alan's own mother, Aunt Lottie had been left a widow, and Alan could not help wondering whether, if she passed away in her turn, Charlie would not come to live permanently at this house. Wilfred Debates had died less than a year ago—a tall thin man who had been secretary of the Co-operative Society in a nearby town. His affairs had just been wound up: his family was going through a somewhat nomadic period.

'I don't know whether I did right selling the house, Father,' said Aunt Lottie.

'Well, you got a good price for it,' said Mr Wrigley. 'Didn't you?'

Mrs Debates was not in the habit of answering questions. 'There was the mortgage to pay off,' she said. 'And I might have to buy another in the end.'

'Why did you sell it then?' said Mr Wrigley.

'Oh, I couldn't have gone on living *there*.'

'Who says a nice chocolate?' inquired Mr Wrigley, pronouncing the word trisyllabically as he always did.

'I do,' said Alan. They had just finished the midday meal, a moment when his grandfather quite often produced a bag of sweets or a box of chocolates from the sideboard drawer. Today it was a box. 'King George,' said Alan, seeing the familiar portrait on the lid.

'After all, they're the best,' said Mr Wrigley.

'Are they?' Alan asked, as eager to believe but as naturally

sceptical as when he first learnt that the Amazon was the longest river in the world.

'No, I couldn't have gone on living there,' said poor Lottie.

'Mother has the first pick,' said Mr Wrigley, arranging a row of chocolates along the edge of the table.

'I don't want one,' said Mrs Wrigley, beginning to stack the plates within her reach.

'Lottie,' said Mr Wrigley.

'Charlie can have mine,' said Mrs Debates.

'Come on then, you boys.'

Charles Debates had left the table on finishing his pudding and was lolling on the sofa reading *Film Fun*. He sprang up, grasped a rectangular nougat—the largest chocolate on view—and pressed it into his mouth. As he crunched it up a pale brown string of saliva descended from his mouth and fell on the tablecloth before he could suck it in again. He rubbed it dry with his elbow—a point embedded in so much flesh that it seemed curved not angled.

Alan's power of choice was paralysed. 'If I get a soft centre,' he said, 'will you find me a safety pin, Grandma?'

Mrs Wrigley assented. It was sometimes Alan's practice, in order to prolong the pleasure of a chocolate, to make a small opening in it and extract the contents with the loop end of a safety pin.

Charles Debates, though his mouth was not yet empty, picked up a marzipan diamond. 'That's me mother's,' he said, taking a bite of it.

Alarmed at this diminution of choice, Alan picked almost blindly and found himself with a species of nut—a hard and almost miniature chocolate, quite unsuitable for a safety pin.

'Wilf liked that house so much,' said Lottie, her eyes filling with tears. It was evident that, although it saddened her, her constant object in every conversation was to lead it round to the topic of her dead husband. 'I wish I could have kept it on, for his sake.'

'Why didn't you?' said Mr Wrigley, sucking his chocolate and then making a few stabs at it with his pickle-chaser.

'I couldn't afford it for one thing, Father.'

'Couldn't afford it? You're rolling in it, Lottie,' said Mr Wrigley callously.

'Now, Father, you know that's not true.'

'Wilfred was a very careful man.'

'Oh, Wilf was good. He did his best to leave Charlie and me all right. He didn't put his money in cotton, you know. But I couldn't have afforded to keep that house on.'

'Now, lads,' said Mr Wrigley, 'one more before I put them away.'

'Do you think that's a coffee cream, Grandpa?' Alan asked.

'It is a coffee cream.'

As Alan took it, Charlie's hand reached over his shoulder and seized two of the remainder. Alan looked round the room in astonishment and it rose to his lips to point out what was obvious, that his grandfather's offer of another chocolate had not extended to Aunt Lottie and that therefore Charlie's taking two was utterly out of order. But since no one seemed aware of the illegal appropriation, Alan quickly convinced himself that silence was the more dignified, the more virtuous course. Charlie sank back once again with *Film Fun* and Alan felt him to be a figure of infinite evil and menace. His head was attached to his body in the neckless manner (only a simulacrum of reality) that a smaller potato is attached to a larger in the game of making potato men that Alan had sometimes played with his grandmother. His thighs almost filled his trouser legs, and above the snake-clasp belt was a loose roll, as though, prepared for some daring escape, he had concealed a coil of rope round his middle under his shirt. In repose his mouth was held more than slightly agape: through the aperture came the sound of the sticking machinery of his respiration. His dark hair grew low on his brow, without any estuary for a parting, and he wore it combed straight back, so well greased for this purpose with solid brilliantine that in the heat of the day a faint green haze would sometimes roll down his forehead.

He let *Film Fun* drop from his fingers and said to his mother: 'Can I go to the pictures this afternoon?'

'I was going to have a lie down this afternoon,' said Lottie. 'My nerves are very bad today.'

'I can go by myself.'

'Will you go to the Grosvenor, then?' said Lottie, naming the nearest cinema.

'All right,' said Charlie. 'Give me some money.'

'I think it's Ronald Colman on at the Grosvenor,' said Alan in a voice he tried to keep from shaking with longing and pleading, and knowing perfectly well that it was Ronald Colman.

'I wanted to see a cowboy,' said Charlie.

'Well, I like a good society drama,' said Lottie, wanting to make things nice for her son.

'I don't,' said Charlie.

'Would you like to go with him?' Mrs Wrigley asked her grandson.

Alan expressed his assent and gratitude, and added, to give himself some pain in this sudden access of pleasure and to save his grandmother's purse: 'We could walk there if we set off now.' Luckily Mary's entrance with the tray for the dirty dishes prevented this remark from being heard.

Mr Wrigley said: 'Mary can choose a chocolate before I put them away.'

'I wouldn't mind another chocolate,' said Charlie, showing some animation on the sofa.

'"Too late, too late! ye cannot enter now",' said Mr Wrigley, swiftly picking up from the edge of the table the chocolates that Mary had not chosen and replacing them in the box. Though he normally preferred to make his displeasure or complaints known through some intermediary, the tone in which he uttered the quotation he had rendered through long repetition familiar to his family was sufficiently acerbic.

'I like Ronald Colman,' Alan mused, conferring on the actor the benefit of his happy anticipation of the delights of the afternoon's outing. 'Who's your favourite film star, Grandpa?'

'Putti,' said Mr Wrigley.

'Who's that, Father?' Lottie inquired.

Alan answered for him. 'Lya de Putti.' The strange syllables were more memorable to him than the player's face, but he had a recollection of a dark exoticism that made Mr Wrigley at once faintly ludicrous and deeply enterprising.

'Who's she when she's at home?' said Lottie.

'She's very good,' said Alan.

'I like that Putti,' said Mr Wrigley.

'Wilf used to like Ronald Colman,' said Lottie, going rather red again. 'If only he could be going with you this afternoon, Charlie.'

Mr Wrigley rose to put away the chocolates and to take from behind the biscuit barrel on the sideboard the pair of stiff white cuffs he had in accordance with his usual habit placed there on coming in that lunchtime from his office. He examined the cuffs and then said to Alan: 'If you're going upstairs, lad, fetch my moustache scissors.'

Alan pressed with infinite vigour and optimism on the stair treads and the bannister rail, delighted to serve his grandfather, casting about in his mind for pleasures he might give to others. He took the scissors from their hook by the bathroom mirror and, catching sight of his image, pulled down the front lock of his hair, snipped the end off and dropped it into the lavatory pan.

On being given the scissors Mr Wrigley began to trim the very slightly frayed starched edges of his cuffs.

'What's the difference between an alligator and a flea?' said Alan to Aunt Lottie.

'That's a very old one, dear.'

'No, but what's the difference, Aunt Lottie?'

'Oh, I can't be bothered.'

'Go on.'

'No, no.'

'Just say anything. Guess.'

'Don't pester, Alan,' said his grandmother.

'Isn't it time you lads were off to the pictures?' Mr Wrigley inquired.

'I'm ready,' said Alan.

'Charlie, do put that comic down and go and get ready,' said Mrs Debates.

'What have you been doing to your hair, Alan?' said Mrs Wrigley.

'The answer's one crawls on its own stomach and the other's not so particular, Aunt Lottie,' said Alan.

'Alan?'

'Nothing, Grannie.'

Charlie and his mother were visiting a relation of the late Mr Debates. Alan and his grandparents were alone for Sunday high tea, a dish of cheese and onions cooked in the oven by Mr Wrigley, as representative of his cuisine as Tosti was of his vocal repertoire. Afterwards Alan knelt on the sofa with his book on the window sill to catch the last of the daylight. People in their Sunday best were still coming out of the park gates with prams, walking-sticks and infants restrained, like a species of not very well domesticated animal, by reins. The brown paint of the window sill stretched before Alan like an utterly familiar landscape. In the corners and along the edges the skin of the paint was sometimes momentarily broken: he had made the cracks himself with his thumb nail in his younger days. Faintly white lagoons of stains indicated where rain had leaked in during stormy weather. A small spider moved purposefully along one of the perforated levers for holding the side windows open. Soon it would be time to pull down the blinds that for this purpose had a cord which ended in a wooden acorn, a device that could be unscrewed to reveal in the upper part of the acorn the knot that secured it to the cord.

In the respective armchairs at the fireplace that they always occupied, Mr and Mrs Wrigley were carrying on one of those conversations of which only snatches were apprehended by Alan through the interest of his book, as though it were being conducted in a foreign language he only partly knew. The word 'Lottie' made him prick up his ears.

'Well, they can't stay here indefinitely,' said his grandfather.

'I think she'd like a post as a housekeeper if she could find

somewhere that would let her have Charlie with her,' said Mrs Wrigley. They both spoke in perfectly clear but consciously subdued voices, as though accepting the stage convention of the selective inaudibility of the aside.

'And who's going to have Charlie?'

'He's not a bad lad,' said Mrs Wrigley. 'He's just been spoilt.'

Alan could not help remembering an incident of yesterday, when he had taken Charlie to the stream, scene of his encounter with the stray dog. On the way, Charlie had called in a tobacconists and emerged with a packet of cigarettes and a box of matches. No sooner had they got to the deserted place when Charlie had said, in unfamiliar but unambiguous language: 'I must do my biz.' There had been a glimpse of a pallid, moon-like bum as he had squatted in the long grass by the path, the smoke from a Player's Weight curling in the still air, and later, on their way back, Alan had observed, passing the spot, what might have been, save for its greater brightness and substance, one of the leaves that had just started to fall from the mature trees of summer. It turned out that the money for the cigarettes and matches had been taken by Charlie from his mother's purse. 'I thought they didn't serve you with cigarettes if you were under sixteen,' said Alan, trying to impose some sort of moral order on the world. 'They think I *am* sixteen,' said Charlie. 'Look at my moustache.' Alan came close to young Debates's face and saw curling at the corners of the curved and rather pouting lips a few long black hairs.

'If poor Lottie's going to have difficulty getting someone to take Charlie,' said Mr Wrigley, 'that's proof positive of the inconvenience of his presence here.'

It suddenly struck Alan, with a force that frightened him, that *vis-à-vis* his grandparents he was in precisely the same position as Charlie Debates—that he lived in this house not of right and that his being loved was not automatic. If he were to steal a shilling from his grandmother's purse, for instance, he surely could not rely as Charlie could with Aunt Lottie on the bonds of relationship saving him from the criminal law. It seemed to him in that moment quite incomprehensible that his

grandparents should have taken him into their home, all the more so when he considered how unadmirable a character he was. He remembered the occasions on his first coming here, when for no reason that he could think of now he had messed his pants, as the phrase was, and, with further malign obtuseness, had simply left them for his grandmother to deal with. He thought of the years of eating his grandparents' food and giving nothing in return. He could not think of a single virtue he possessed to compensate for the expense and inconvenience of his presence. And his faults seemed peculiarly heinous for one in his position—for instance, his fear of encountering not only people he knew but also those he thought might specially remark him, so that seeing far off in the street a lady from the Mothers' Union or a boy of a size capable of intimidation he would deviate down some alley like an animal instinctively timorous. And though he perhaps could not be said to be shy with those closest to him, he usually passed most of his time with them buffered by a book or a paint brush.

'Of course,' said Mrs Wrigley, 'she's no need to confine herself to housekeeper's posts. She could get a job in a shop. Charlie's of an age when he could be left. She could afford to buy a little house.'

'I can't see poor Lottie selling anything,' said Mr Wrigley.

'You can't see her making a good housekeeper,' said Mrs Wrigley, 'but I expect she'll fit in somewhere.'

'She'll be lucky if she finds someone as soft as Wilfred Debates,' said Mr Wrigley.

Remarkable, Alan thought, this description of Uncle Wilfred. He had a memory of Charlie's father sitting forward in his chair and explaining that the name 'Debates' was originally 'De Bates', of Norman origin, and conferred distinction on whoever possessed it. Perhaps it was during the same visit that in the hall he had watched his uncle remove his cap, take a comb from his breast pocket and run it through his hair, saying quite seriously, though Alan was the only auditor: 'My hair's getting terribly thin.' Alan had received the confidence with solemnity, though it had seemed to him then that thin hair was the most desirable kind, and he envied Uncle

Wilfred's in which the marks of the comb could be clearly seen in a surface flecked a little by particles of dust or scurf. That this man had been 'soft' required him to be fitted into a completely different compartment of Alan's mind.

All the same, it was this indulgent, weak and somewhat ludicrous individual (for this was what must be understood by 'soft') who despite his premature death had left Lottie 'rolling in it', or, allowing for Mr Wrigley's customary hyperbole, at any rate not urgently in need of employment. If Uncle Wilfred could leave so much wealth behind, what, it occurred to Alan to wonder, about his father? He remembered, as though they had concerned some fictional character, the house at Greenhead, the Lanchester, the sideboard in the dining-room with drawers of immense thickness, lined with green baize, that ran with dreamlike smoothness. All those accumulations, in which he seemed to remember his father taking a simple pride, had utterly vanished. After his mother's death he recalled seeing on the sideboard in *this* room, letters, headed with brutal succinctness 'C. L. Percival deceased. E. Percival deceased.' He had heard his grandfather in those days more than once disclose to third parties that he 'was Enid and Carl's executor'. With a stab of excitement in his middle he thought that perhaps some day he would, like the youngest son of a fairy tale, come into an inheritance that he had never expected and for which his comparatively unlucky and straitened life had been a mere test or apprenticeship.

'Switch the light on, Alan,' said Mrs Wrigley, 'and draw the curtains.'

The grey flowers of the sofa's upholstery, the green pile of the fringed cloth on the table, the pale oak looped with silver of the biscuit barrel, the black marble pillars and pediment of the mantelpiece clock—all these sprang out from the scarcely differentiated powdered gloom almost to Alan's disappointment, for he had seemed to be living in some insubstantial world to which the rules of ordinary existence did not apply. Now time had started to run for the bathetic moments when poor Lottie and her son would return, Mr Wrigley set off for his club, and he be forced to go to bed.

His grandfather stood out even more vividly than the other objects of the room no doubt mainly because of his best suit but also because of the tints of his nose and the twin protuberances of his brow, and the different rufescence of his moustache. This rather Fauvelike colouring of the physiognomy was emphasized and controlled by the black ribbon of the pince-nez, the wing collar and the dark tie. The distinction of his appearance—certainly that conferred by the ribbon—had mainly come, Alan seemed to think, in recent years, as though, like his taste in cigars, Mr Wrigley had inherited it from Alan's father.

Alan knelt on the sofa again to draw the curtains and was startled to see a face outside the window, the nose pressed palely against the glass like the limb of an orthopod. In a moment he realized that it belonged to his Uncle George and that Iris also stood with him on the path outside. He announced the news excitedly to his grandparents and then ran to open the front door.

'Well, Dickie Pink,' said George.

'What have you two come for?' Alan said, only able to express his pleasure by a species of feeble impudence.

'Not to see thee, so ger out o' t' road,' said George, in imitation of the speech that emanated from Brierley Court.

It took Alan back to the happy days of George's courtship to see, when they had all gone into the dining-room, that Iris was wearing her navy blue costume. He could not understand his grandfather almost immediately leaving this bonus of amusement and beauty for his club—indeed, using the arrival of George and Iris as a hostage for his going earlier than usual.

'Where's poor Lottie?' asked George, and on being told added: 'And the cuckoo in her nest?'

Alan laughed loudly to show his complete comprehension of this allusion to Charlie, and said: 'Do you know, Uncle George, he makes everything into sandwiches?'

George looked puzzled.

'I mean at mealtimes. He started off by just making things like cold meat and boiled ham into sandwiches. Now, if we have fish and chips he makes sandwiches of the chips.'

'Why doesn't he make sandwiches of the fish?'

'Well, I expect it's too thick or too big.'

'It's no thicker than a chip.'

'It could be if it was halibut,' said Alan, with masterful logic. 'He makes sandwiches when he has a boiled egg, too.'

'Does he make sandwiches out of potato pie?' George inquired.

'No,' said Alan with a scornful giggle.

'He could put the meat and potato in one sandwich, and then make another out of the crust. That wouldn't be too thick.'

'Grannie says making sandwiches is very wasteful of bread.'

'It'd be wasteful of potato pie, too.'

'Aren't you going to take your things off?' Mrs Wrigley asked.

'We can't stay, Mother,' said George. 'We're on our way to Tom Lawton's.'

'Just for a minute,' pleaded Mrs Wrigley.

To show their willingness to oblige Mrs Wrigley but without making any large concession, Iris unbuttoned her costume coat. Alan was about to remark on the quite noticeable convexity of her stomach in the navy skirt, it being in his mind to compare her figure jocularly with that of Charlie Debates, when he remembered years ago saying something of the kind to his mother and her embarrassed displeasure at it. He coughed elaborately instead of speaking, staggered to think that Iris was an exemplar of that biological phenomenon he had always thought somewhat remote and unlikely.

Alan saw that his uncle, passably assuming the persona of Mrs Whittle, a member of the Mothers' Union Dramatic Society, was now conversing with his grandmother who herself, falling in readily with her son's fantastic mood, was also acting a senile character but with less identifiable result. Alan marvelled that she should so love George and be quite in, different, if not positively hostile, to Lottie.

At the church concert the Mothers were to do the screen scene from *The School for Scandal*. Alan had hastened from school to attend the dress rehearsal, a treat promised him by his

grandmother who was producing the play for the Dramatic Society. Mrs Wrigley had several times told them of the cast's ingenuity in making its own costumes and Alan had imagined the lace cuffs, the flared silk jackets, the enormous Gainsborough hats of an historical film. With initial dismay he saw on the tiny stage of the church hall a Sir Peter Teazle whose massive hindquarters had been encased in a species of voluminous plus fours, the bold floral pattern of which clearly indicated its previous existence as a curtain or settee cover, while on 'his' legs were a pair of everyday lisle stockings of brownish hue. But soon he became accustomed to this convention which also gave to the 'men' the same pointed black or brown louis-heeled shoes as the women of the play and failed to differentiate fundamentally between the sexes so that Charles Surface had a bosom as large as, if not larger than, Lady Sneerwell's. And when his grandmother whispered to him that of course on the night the 'men' would powder their hair, it seemed to him that the illusion created by the Mothers was almost perfect and not destroyed by Mary entering as though to clear away the table at home but carrying incongruously for that purpose a silver-knobbed cane.

He was impressed with his grandmother's artistic authority on this occasion. The lady who kept the sub-post office complained that her hair would never do for her part as Joseph Surface. 'Now I'm getting on,' she said, 'my hair's like a doll's.' Alan saw that it was indeed of a dry scantiness and monolithic closeness to the skull, but Mrs Wrigley said: 'It's the very shape for a Georgian wig, Mrs Schofield. It's going to look lovely.'

It was at this time, too, that Mrs Wrigley began to develop her talent for the graphic arts. Her interest had been originally aroused with George's, and a couple of sepia landscapes of hers, inspired by picture postcards, had been thought accomplished enough to be framed and hung in a bedroom. But now, while Alan squared up an illustration in an old *Chatterbox* and painstakingly copied it in Indian ink, her pencil moved with a new freedom.

They sat opposite each other at the dining-room table. Now

and again Alan would relax his cramped hand and neck, get up, and go round to inspect the progress of his grandmother's work. Sometimes it consisted merely of an irregular medallion filled with little panels of birds, human heads, country scenes, words. The pencil boldly rounded the panels, starting at the top of the sheet, and filled each one in before passing to the next. It was indefatigable in its shading, its re-tracing of outlines, and its changing its designs into something else.

Alan watched a peacock turn into a female head and expressed his regret at seeing the bird go.

'Never mind,' said Mrs Wrigley. 'That's what it wants to do.' The impersonal pronoun referred to her pencil.

'Can't you stop it?' asked Alan, not for the first time.

'Not when it starts off on its own.'

'But don't you know what it's going to draw?'

'No,' said Mrs Wrigley, looking down at her moving hand.

'Look, it's doing a word now.'

'E-A-R,' Alan began to read. The letters had many decorative loops and whorls.

'CARL,' said Mrs Wrigley. 'Don't you see? It's written your father's name. I wonder why that is.'

'Is it spirits writing it?'

'Who knows?'

Alan had often himself held a pencil detachedly in his hand, hoping that some power beyond himself would start moving it over the paper, but nothing of the kind had ever happened. He looked enviously at his grandmother's page and said: 'I wish it would write something else.' It seemed to him that from this unseen world could come messages of supreme importance.

'It's stopped writing now,' said Mrs Wrigley. 'It's doing another peacock.'

'Why did it write father's name?'

'Because you were here, I expect.'

That his father should be thus manifested on his account seemed to Alan an honour he could not possibly deserve. To be given parental attention or concern was a service he had so long ceased to expect from life that if he had thought about it

he would have regarded himself as outside the normal human institution of the family.

'You're getting very like your father,' added Mrs Wrigley.

'Oh yes?' said Alan, faintly and foolishly.

'Not so much ~~in~~ looks as in ways. He liked reading, too.'

'Did he?' It was a revelation, since all he remembered of his father were a few isolated incidents of trivial import—his father in bed, handing him some foreign stamps; his father irritably correcting him for using the phrase 'packed full'.

'He had a lot of books.'

What had become of them? Alan wondered covetously. It did not occur to him to ask, any more than to discover, by catechizing his grandmother, further details of his father's life and character, which seemed to him one of those subjects, like the reproductive processes, that one did not discuss in polite society.

Mrs Wrigley's pencil stopped and she contemplated her finished drawing. 'I always wonder what it means,' she said.

The word CARL (if such it was) had long since been covered over by a fine scribble like a piece of plain knitting, and there was no other unambiguous clue. 'Perhaps it's a picture of something in another world,' said Alan, knowing the allusion to a plurality of existences would please and stimulate his grandmother.

'I don't think it's beyond the bounds of possibility that we should know something about other worlds,' Mrs Wrigley replied. 'And I don't say that the other worlds are beyond this one. For us, another world would be the world of the past. We may have existed then. We're made out of matter and the matter existed then. Perhaps when we think we can remember another life we are remembering that previous re-arrangement of ourselves.'

Alan listened with pleasure but indifference: his grandmother's theories did not move him. But when she had gone for his supper milk and biscuits he looked out of the window over the park to where the moon was rising in a dramatic grotto of yellow and black, and thought about the orb being two hundred thousand miles away. He had a clear vision of all

the scattered fragments of the universe and for a moment was stupefied by a sense of the total impossibility of his ever discovering what had brought them into being and for what purpose. All that was certain was the staggering irrelevance of his own existence.

'You'd have thought that Mr and Mrs Middleton would have given the baby something better than a rattle,' said Mrs Wrigley, returning with the tray. She referred to the birth of Iris's son. 'They can well afford it.'

Alan had always regarded Iris's mother, because of her frequent bequest of an orange, as particularly generous. 'Perhaps it's Mr Middleton's fault,' he suggested.

'The baby won't be able to use a rattle for months, anyway.'

'He didn't use to let Iris put lipstick on,' said Alan, as though this, too, were a characteristic of parsimony.

'I don't blame him for that,' said Mrs Wrigley emphatically.

Alan thought of the stain on Iris's blouse that had held his eye long before he had realized that it was milk from her breast. When she had put the child on her knee and taken off its napkin a tight and surprisingly large scrotum was revealed, which she regarded without turning a hair.

'Who do you think *you* were, Grannie, in your former existence?'

'Come along, drink your milk up. School tomorrow.'

In his bedroom he was careful not to stand with his back to the curtains. His recent experience of the drama had not been confined to *The School for Scandal*. His Uncle Arthur, whose timorous wife had balked at the outing, had taken him to the local theatre, where a touring company was playing *Dracula*. The most lasting terror of the play was the Count's habit of unexpected appearance, particularly from behind curtains. It seemed remarkable to Alan that though he had not the slightest disposition to believe in vampires' existence, nevertheless his heart and guts considered it likely, when night fell, that a tall, cloaked, livid-visaged figure would materialize in this familiar, and unexciting house. *Dracula* had revived his fear of the dark that he thought was being gradually allayed, so that once again he wondered anxiously how he would manage to exist

when, grown-up, he had to return to his own empty, vampire-concealing house at night, alone.

One day he went with his grandmother on a series of tram drives across the town to visit some relations he had heard of but never before met—the widow of one of Mrs Wrigley's brothers, her second husband, and the daughter of her first marriage. Mrs Sugden, very pale and fat, was lying ill in a large brass double bed in one of the small, close downstairs rooms. Mr Sugden wore an unbuttoned waistcoat and though his shirt neck was neatly done up with a bright-headed stud, it was collarless. The daughter—who strangely called Mrs Wrigley 'Aunt Louisa'—was a taciturn and thick-set spinster of forty. The talk made little impression on Alan but he was conscious of a magnifying glass on top of the daily paper, a canary in a cage, a rag rug in front of the fire, and a strong smell of bodies.

When they left, Mrs Wrigley said: 'Well, I've done my duty.'

'I thought she was glad to see you,' said Alan. Mrs Sugden's health had been the reason of her sister-in-law's going.

'Fred Sugden was always shiftless.'

'Was he?'

Mrs Wrigley shook out from her handbag a flat oblong tin of 'Meloids'—little hot black pellets that she sucked in winter for her catarrh—and offered it to Alan. As they got on the tram she said: 'We pass not far from Greenhead Cemetery. We'll get off there.'

Embarrassed for a reason he could not give a name to, Alan said irrelevantly: 'I didn't know we were so near Greenhead.' When he drew in a breath he felt the air cool on his menthol-impregnated palate. They were in an indifferent district of the town: opposite them sat women in shawls clutching purses damp and limp with ingrained sweat; a man carrying a basin in a red handkerchief that had contained his dinner.

The cemetery was in a part of Greenhead that seemed quite strange to him. They passed through immense gate-posts of blackened stone, their iron gates drawn back and secured. On either side of the gravelled drive, on the tilted land, was a

litter of grass, monuments and flowers. Occasionally a raw, sandy slope showed where the subsoil had been reached by a new digging. Though the impression was one of a variety of stones and symbols, in fact many graves were simply grass-covered mounds, at most with jam jars or tin vases at the foot or head. As his grandmother marched not quite surely along the side paths, Alan read name after alien name, some lust for antiquity driving him to try to find the remotest possible date of death. Sometimes they passed a human figure or two, the garb or the burden of flowers or the liquid eye denoting an intimate connection with the place that Alan at least did not feel. And then he saw on a rather massive and dark grey stone, some distance off, his own surname. His grandmother was still passing some neutral remark, and he said nothing, feeling his heart beat quicker, his face grow hot. At last his grandmother could not fail to see the thing.

'Here it is,' she said, stopping at the foot of the neglected grave.

It was infinitely more ample, more detailed, than he could have imagined. Below the formal 'SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF' were not only his parents' names and dates but also those of his sister and brother, the exposed brevity of their lives almost explaining the insubstantiality of his memory of them. He wondered how they had managed to secure their multiple and impressive names, which, indeed, came back to him now as though they related to persons of real character and attainments.

'They don't keep it nice,' said Mrs Wrigley, 'do they? Perhaps your grandfather has forgotten to pay this year. We might have brought some flowers.'

'Well, we didn't know we were coming.' Even Iris's baby had passed the age his siblings had achieved. Could it possibly be that his mother had been as Iris was—young, attractive, the milk staining her blouse?

'Your mother chose the stone.'

What a ghastly task that must have been, he thought. He glanced at his grandmother, asked himself if he understood her fully, and immediately answered himself in the negative.

Recently in a book he had come across a character called 'Teresa' and had realized that this was the proper spelling of the word he had hitherto always thought of as 'Treezer', the name of his paternal aunt. So now it dawned upon him that the young woman who lay here underneath the lumpy grass was his grandmother's daughter—that this was why they had come to the cemetery. 'It's a very fine one,' he said.

'She never saw it erected,' said Mrs Wrigley.

They stood for some minutes more without speaking, long past the time when the cold might reasonably have caused his grandmother to move. The afternoon was wearing rapidly on: apart from a white rim round the horizon, the sky was almost as grey as the tombstone. In the lodge at the cemetery gates, which could be seen in the distance under some bare and claw-like trees, a yellow light already shone. He thought that if he had been alone it would disquietingly have occurred to him that the moment was approaching when any member of the Undead who happened to be in this cemetery would be able to leave the grave of its daytime immobility. Even the far-off barking of a dog seemed here to have sinister vulpine connotations.

He remembered once lying in Joan Rhodes' garden—perhaps not very far from here—his bare leg touching hers. The recollection was at once pleasurable and poignant. He thought that he might have called at the Rhodes' house this very day had it not been for his grandmother, and speculated for a moment or two on how he might give her the slip. All at once it seemed astonishing that he had never sought Joan out to try to renew those intimacies of his childhood, now dim, fabulous, remote.

III

Though for many years he had said he wanted to be a journalist—a notion that had evolved from an initial conviction that he was fitted to be a newspaper cartoonist—his first journeys to

the *Northern Evening News*, his wearing a trilby hat and being addressed as Mr Percival, seemed to him unalterably strange. He had to get up early to catch his train so that he was not far into that first autumn after his leaving school before he emerged from the house into darkness, sometimes alleviated by an over-ripe iridescence from the moon. The pavement rang with the footfalls of some other few male workers and the tram would eventually arrive at the stop all illuminated as though it were a late tram of the night and not one of the first of the day. Dawn came up, as the winter solstice approached, over the terraces of tiny houses that followed the railway line, and then at last over the canal-sliced, chimney-bordered, slag-surrounded fields that was the furthest from industrialization the country achieved during the journey. The train arrived rather too soon for him to go straight to the *News* without appearing stupid for being there before work could start: for half an hour he had to idle among the hurrying thousands of the town—pretend to have a destination along the mud-filmed pavements, avoid the purlieus of the *News* in case he should foolishly reveal his aimlessness to his colleagues, hope that the boxes would have already been put outside the second-hand bookshop.

For all the embarrassments of this and other periods of the day, he found moving potentialities in the new town which he felt even as with sleep-pricked eyes he ate his breakfast alone at the kitchen table, his grandmother in nightdress and overcoat, the alarm clock which had roused them and timed his egg ticking loudly through the early silence. And though he was aware of the sordidness of the stations of departure and destination—the thick, creased porters' waistcoats, the exacerbating pitch of an escape of steam, the smell of urinals—it did not damp the fantasies that changing places evolved in him, so that, for example, with the dust of worn brown upholstery in his nose or gazing down at cigarette packets and spittle on the track by a platform he thought of the names that conjured up most precisely the kind of beauty he wished girls to have—Cynthia, Stella, Denise, Corinne—somewhat staggered, too, at the concept that girls had names at all.

He had not been going to the *News* long before he stopped wearing a hat. He began, too, to buy shirts to which the collars were attached. Quite quickly he evolved for himself a mask which seemed to be satisfactorily Bohemian: flying hair and tie, adam's apple well above the collar, a belted raincoat rather longer and lighter than normal. Though the face appertaining to those accoutrements was grave and withdrawn, he was perpetually conscious of his appearance, imagining in some detail the impression of himself formed in the mind of others. In this character he evolved the name for himself of 'Sebastian Knype' as altogether more descriptive of himself than his own and used it to sign a few articles on the state of England which he wrote and sent unsuccessfully to the weekly papers. And it was not only girls that he thought of as wondering about his genius or being impressed by his looks: in a café where he would sometimes waste ten minutes over a coffee before he went to the *News* even the presence of a conventionally attired and middle-aged man at his table prompted him to read his book with an intense concentration, an extra panache in turning the leaves.

At the same time the arrival of a pimple disgusted him with his appearance. When sitting in a tram or conversing, he tried to arrange his aspect so that his current pimples would not be observed. He accumulated remedies, beginning with unsophisticated ointments whose greasy hues could be used only at night and proceeding via calamine to the brilliant palliative of flesh-coloured court plaster, behind which he felt comparatively safe and whole. How well he came to know the various characters his pustules took on according to their topographical location! On the forehead, for instance, no doubt because of the bone near the surface, they were hard, extensive, slow to come to a head – almost resembling the result of a blow to that part. And occasionally they appeared on the nose, where appropriately they were of an extra redness, like the make-up of a low comedian. Even the lobes of his ears would sometimes become swollen and empurpled, so that at the climax he would squeeze them between finger and thumb and cause the contents to fly out a yard or so. The current state of his face

was never far from his thoughts: he would brood on it with such misery and in so much detail that catching himself in a glass sometimes he would be agreeably astonished to find the blemishes in his complexion not after all extending to an impossibly large area and the non-blemished part not pasty but actually showing evidence of health.

But quite soon his working life grew out of the rigid and formal shape he had imagined it was going to take and to which at first he tried to make it conform. He saw that it was unnecessary to pretend to be occupied during his idle times: like some other members of the editorial staff he even went along to gossip with the typists or the lady at the telephone switch-board. His shyness relented in such moments and he often became indiscreetly bold. Despite his longing to be in love, his taste for girls was morbidly discriminating. None of the female members of the staff to whom through usage he had found himself able to speak qualified for his erotic attention: they might, despite their nubility, have all been sympathetic aunts, since his conversation with them often consisted of his expounding his ideas—usually his detestation of conventional life, for it had been plain to him for a year or two that it was ridiculous to conform to a world which had produced the present social and political state of affairs.

The love he sought, though in one sense impossibly beyond his deserts or luck, seemed perpetually about to fall within his grasp. He saw one evening in the *News* the photograph of a girl, beautiful but kindly and innocent, and in an excited day-dream as he undressed for bed decided to seek her out and declare his admiration. The next day the notion, though less plausible, still lingered with him. The brief story under the photograph revealed where the girl, beauty queen at some suburban fête, worked in her non-regal hours. Alar quitted the *News* at the startlingly illegal time of 11.20. With what seemed to him a masterly grasp of practicalities, he realized that as a mill-hand she would be going home to her 'dinner' at noon, and he planned to stand near the factory gates and watch for her. The expedition was removed from the realms of the

dreamlike to those of the practical by his finding his precise destination from the telephone directory and the street guide in the reporters' room. He spent the tram fare with prodigality: the payment seemed utterly outside the system of thriftiness in which his grandmother had brought him up.

As he had imagined, he found the entrance to the factory. He was able to keep it under observation by standing, embarrassed, excited, at the window of a sweet shop on the opposite corner. Eventually the employees emerged, many girls among the men, but he could not pick out the beauty queen, and he soon walked off (unable to stand up to the occasional glance, his tie and hair blown by the gritty wind), his body acting some urgent purpose that failed to exist even in his imagination. It seemed to add to the disorder of the episode that he did not return for his lunch to the centre of the town, but quite near the beauty queen's factory bought a meat pie and ate it as he walked along.

He arrived at the deserted reporters' room at the dead hour of 1.30. He was about to go along the corridor to the nook in which the telephone switchboard was situated to talk to the relief telephonist when Mr Baker, the Chief Reporter, entered.

'Where were you earlier on?' he asked.

'I had to go out,' said Alan.

'I could have done with you. Jim Sudlow's still at the police court. That case is going over till the afternoon. I wanted someone at the Mayor's Parlour.'

'I'm free now, Mr Baker.'

'Too late, lad, too late.' The Chief Reporter removed the minute stub of cigarette from between his moustached lips with the second finger and thumb of a hand held palm downwards. Ash covered his waistcoat; a white scum filled the corners of his eyes; his complexion was grey. 'I sent Gibbs. Where were you?'

Alan mumbled. 'Private . . . business.'

'Let someone know if you're going out. Better still, ask me. Eh?'

'Yes, Mr Baker.'

'D'you like this job? Are you going—'

'Yes, why?' Alan interrupted, suddenly blushing and bold.

'I just thought that sometimes you're not with us. In another sphere of existence. How's the shorthand going?'

'All right,' Alan said sullenly.

'Keep it up, keep it up,' said Mr Baker, and left the room.

Alan felt a rebellious exacerbation at the logic that put the ignorant, stale tobacco-breathed Baker on a more virtuous level than himself. He even tried to prove to his own satisfaction that he was a better journalist than the Chief Reporter: after all, journalism was more—was something other—than seeing that a report was received of a petty embezzlement by a Town Councillor.

His grandmother said to him: 'You never see John Harris these days.' It was true that he no longer craved this boy's company as he had in his last year at school. 'Primary aim in life' was a catchword dating from a memorably eccentric lesson given to the Sixth Form by the Headmaster: the estrangement of John Harris perhaps dated from the moment when Alan in conversation with his friend had implied (with tortuous obliquity) that his primary aim was not journalistic eminence or genius for caricature but the achievement of love—a purpose that necessarily excluded John's continuing intimate companionship. How unsophisticated their friendship had been was shown by Alan's ignorance of public house procedure. During his first few days at the *News* he had, prompted to yet higher flights by his new independence, gone one lunchtime into a pub, and called out to the barmaid, over the hubbub, between two dark-suited, bowler-hatted men, the words he had previously worked out as appropriate: 'A gill of bitter, please.' 'Bitter', he knew, was a common type of beer. 'Gill' was not only an appropriate measure but the word of quantity itself had come, in beer drinkers' parlance, to denote the actual substance. Only some time afterwards did Alan acquire the knowledge to enable him to realize that the mordant liquor passed over the counter by the barmaid, in a glass containing indubitably less than half a pint, was a gin and bitters. He had tossed off the potion with an inebriate's

relish and dispatch, telling himself that its extortionate price was not too much to pay for its concentrated strangeness, refusing to admit to himself the disastrous blow to his daily finances.

Besides, his irregular and sometimes late homecomings mitigated against his arranging to meet John, whose going to work in a local insurance office meant his keeping almost the same hours as when he was at school. Alan began to exchange sarcasm and slander with one of his fellow-reporters, a young man with a moustache and a tendency to rabbit teeth who brushed his hair straight back and wore suede shoes. Alan was surprised to learn that Michael Jones came from as far away as Chesterfield but was enabled to work at the *News* by living in 'digs'. 'Why don't you come and join me?' he soon asked Alan. 'She takes two and a chap's just left.' The notion was ludicrous: his grandmother would never permit it and he in his turn could never leave his grandmother. He was quite different from Michael—and, indeed, most of the rest of the world—who did not appear to form demanding relationships.

And yet it was not long afterwards, when his grandmother's remark about John Harris gave him the opening he had long hoped for and dreaded, that he was putting the case for his living in 'digs'. 'I get home so late. I'm really too tired to go round and see John. Anyway, he'd be fixed up to do something else by then.' He could not believe in his own persuasion but it was as though some additional force were working for him—an abstraction like History—and after a few unhappy weeks it was agreed that he should stay at Mrs Wolstencroft's, coming home only for Sundays and his half day.

He imagined that the move involved boundless and exciting freedom, and dreamed of irregular routines and extraordinary encounters. The Wolstencrofts lived a short tram ride from the centre of the town in a small semi-detached house in an elderly but respectable street. Two emaciated stucco pillars enclosed a front door which at some remote epoch had been elaborately painted to imitate graining of a yellowish hue. The inner door was composed partly of stained glass and two rooms opened on

to the narrow hall—the front was used only for Miss Wolstencroft's piano lessons, the back was the lodgers' sitting- and dining-room. At the rear the hall became a short passage leading to the kitchen where Mrs Wolstencroft and her daughter had their being. Mrs Wolstencroft was old and the upper rim of her corsets could be plainly seen, almost as high as her armpits, under the crocheted jumpers she affected, as though her upper torso were an egg in its cup. Miss Wolstencroft was a more severe, not to say masculine figure, with short hair kept back by a tortoiseshell slide and fringed tongues to her shoes. It was Miss Wolstencroft who at breakfast time brought into the lodgers as they waited in their room the enormous pot of tea, and the two plates each usually containing a very salt rasher of bacon with the rind on and half a small tomato sitting on its wrinkled skin, the pattern of its interior equally tough as prominent. It was some time before Alan realized that the deficiency in the flavour and quantity of breakfast was not a mere accident arising from a temporary fall in quality of the Wolstencrofts' grocer's stock and the misjudging of his and Michael Jones's appetites but precisely what his grandmother had meant when in her arguments against his going into digs she agonizingly wondered what he would have to put up with in the way of food.

When he came back for high tea or during the evening, a pupil would be playing some piece in the front room as heavily and haltingly as an ill-oiled automaton. At the end of the passage the open kitchen door would disclose the seated and unoccupied figure of Mrs Wolstencroft. Alan felt impelled when she greeted him to go forward and make some amiable remark although from experience he knew that he would be detained by her monologue as though the kitchen doorway were the frame of some devilish device of the Inquisition, which left him able to writhe but not escape wherever he clutched or leant against it. Her theme was most often the iniquitous expense of some item of household consumption, mainly an electric water heater which 'she' (Mrs Wolstencroft never referred to her daughter except by the personal pronoun) had recently had installed, but which if it were left to her, Mrs

Wolstencroft, would be removed tomorrow, for it would be cheaper to heat the water by burning banknotes under the boiler. The name of this apparatus, as Alan knew from the manufacturers' advertisements, was the 'Windsor', but Mrs Wolstencroft invariably referred to it as the 'Windsior'.

She also made an error of nomenclature when discussing the other subject of greatest concern to her—the wretched state of the world. The troubles in Spain and even the abdication of Edward VIII Mrs Wolstencroft anatomized as being 'all the fault of that 'Ilton'—meaning by that, to Alan, initially mysterious proper name, the German Chancellor. Mrs Wolstencroft's error was to be somewhat excused and perhaps explained by the name of the great man of the town—builder, magistrate, alderman, chairman of the football club—being Hilton; though the question whether Mrs Wolstencroft actually envisaged him making bellicose speeches to uniformed followers and suchlike, slightly dubious though his local reputation was, remained unresolved.

As the routine of the day started, Alan often felt a melancholy boredom and lack of purpose. When Michael Jones came into their room he would switch the wireless on and tune it to Radio Luxemburg. Often he had some jest to impart, the fruit of the previous evening's social drinking, a jest usually obscene but sometimes no more than a music hall exchange, involving the asking a question of Alan such as 'Do you know the big horse song?' to which the reply 'No' produced the explanation 'Because I love you'. The various stages of breakfast were accompanied by a scarcely varying succession of advertising jingles and popular songs from the loudspeaker. Waiting for Miss Wolstencroft and the tray, hyperconscious of the latest pimple, feeling in the chill of the room the cloth of his trousers against his knees like the means of some subtly uncomfortable torture, listening to Michael's facetiousness, he would follow in his mind the idiotic words of a chorus that began 'We are the Ovalteenies', sung by a choir of child impersonators. Miss Wolstencroft, for all her air of no nonsense, had an imperfect sense of their obligation to be at

the *News* at the appointed hour: the song of the Ovalteenies already denoted the very latest time they could get through breakfast at all and soon from behind the dusty gold material that filled the interstices of the grille of the loudspeaker came the innocent words that through their invariable association with haste, gulped tea and uneased bowels, took on for Alan a highly unpleasant significance:

Hurrah for Betox, what a delightful smell!

The stuff that every self-respecting grocer has to sell . . .

The evenings could not all be occupied in pleasure. Even the free wandering in the streets of the town centre, which had struck him when he was agitating to be allowed to come into digs as an utterly inexhaustible source of gratification, was cut down by inclement weather and ennui. He found himself often condemned to the room at the Wolstencrofts', reading in a species of chair with wooden arms and exiguous cushions, and an adjustable back that when leaned against adjusted itself to a position of discomfort; the light, in a tiny glass shade, at once glaring and gloomy.

One night, coming back at the dead hour of eight, filled with depressed sensitivity, he saw a girl standing in the tiny porch of the other house of the semi-detached pair. His practised glance took in everything that could be seen in the light from the distant street lamp, and tried, as they always did, to find the girl's eyes. When he was in the hall, the front door shut, he formulated to himself clearly what he had realized all along but had been too gormless or timid to act upon, that the girl was not an ordinary caller since she had been positively leaning against the wall of the porch, her hands in the pockets of her belted mac. It would have been legitimate, plausible, natural, for him to speak to her. Already in love, he day-dreamed of her coming with him on walks, to the theatre, even to this familiar room on whose threshold he now hovered and which was already transformed by the conception. An immense agitation filled his breast at the thought that he should go out of the house again, speak to her, inquire if he

could be of assistance, chat, make an assignation. He was completely convinced that he could never summon up enough courage to speak to her, that the notion of doing so lay in fantastically Utopian realms. And yet the agitation went on. He turned and took a step back towards the front door and then, since this brought him opposite the hall-stand (whose knobs were of an exaggerated kind, like darning mushrooms), he pretended—to deceive the invisible watcher of all his actions—to be taking off his raincoat.

There proved to be, however, a visible watcher. 'Can you spare a minute, Mr Whatsaname?' said Mrs Wolstencroft, from the kitchen.

'I'm just going out again,' said Alan, humping his coat back on to his shoulders.

'Don't forget to switch that hall light out, then. We're going to have a terrible electric bill this quarter—with that Windsior. If I told her once, I told her twenty times . . .'

'Shan't be long, Mrs Wolstencroft.' It seemed to him that if he could speak to the girl he would afterwards gladly spend as long with Mrs Wolstencroft as she liked to talk.

' . . . put a thing in like that you're asking for trouble, but no, she wouldn't take any notice . . .'

He actually opened the door. The night seemed to him remarkable: had there been time he would have investigated with interest the blur of the moon, the wet road, the silhouette of the opposite houses. It was astonishing to find the girl still there, that a few seconds, not enormous hours, had elapsed since he had first seen her. And his very reappearance was so outrageously bold that it required scarcely any more courage to lean against the pattern of blunt iron spikes that on a dwarf wall separated the little gardens of the two houses, and say: 'It occurred to me . . . can I help you?'

• 'It's all right. I've been locked out. But I expect my grandmother'll be back any time now.'

, 'Isn't there anyone in?' he asked, appreciating her indulgence at not taking flight at his foolish commonplaces.

It appeared that she had forgotten her key, that her grandmother was unexpectedly out.

'Have you tried the back?' His resourcefulness, energy and ingenuity seemed boundless.

'The back gate's bolted.'

'I'll climb over.'

'The back door will be locked.'

'I'll find a window to get through. A. Percival, the well-known cat-burglar.'

'I think I'll just give grandma a few minutes.'

Her macintosh proved to be light blue, substantial yet rubbery—a garment of essential strangeness, as though she were a visitor from another planet. He could distinguish no flaw in her features. It turned out that the reason he had not encountered her before was that she lived in another town, was merely visiting her grandparents. On the back of her head she wore a beret toning with her macintosh: her dark hair was arranged so that one side of it tended to fall over one eye. Soon her grandmother came up the path, and since Alan's identity was not revealed to her he felt during the ensuing conversation with her granddaughter completely *de trop*, though it must have been perfectly plain to the surprisingly commonplace old lady that he had been playing some important role in her granddaughter's misadventure. The grandmother took the vital key from her purse and let herself into the house. The girl followed, but before disappearing said to Alan: 'Good night.'

'Good night,' he said, his voice warm, his diction, to his ears, impeccable. He could not bring himself to go back into the house, though uncomfortably conscious that Mrs Wolstencroft would be disappointed at not being able to continue her talk with him. He swung down the road, his hands deep in his raincoat pockets, the wind taking his hair: he wondered if perhaps the girl might not be watching him from a window. He breathed through his nose and, in contradistinction to the practices of his recent boyhood when in the street he would sometimes pretend to be crippled, took consciously, full strides to convince both himself and her that he was long-legged, loose-limbed.

The next night he had a ticket for the Shed Theatre, booked at the time of his becoming a member some weeks before. It scarcely disturbed him that an opportunity of encountering the girl again would be postponed—not because it was unlikely that she would forget her key on successive nights but because time stood still in the fantasy of his mind so that she seemed a creation of art who could neither age nor live without his participation.

A fire blazed in the foyer of the Shed Theatre and several members warmed their bottoms before it as though they were in their own homes. A chandelier made in the likeness of a cartwheel hung from the arched roof, the walls were white-washed and the stone floor laid with coconut matting. A smiling and superior lady sold Alan a programme, which he read with grave concentration, a little apart from the waiting groups. However, a middle-aged man emerging from the little alcove where coats could be hung, and pausing to light his cigarette, brought Alan into the family atmosphere by observing: 'Very much colder tonight.'

'You can tell that,' said Alan glibly, 'by the members round the fire.'

The man laughed and took out his cigarette case again, offering it to Alan as though rewarding him for his ready wit. 'No, thank you,' Alan said.

'Ah well, it looks like a good audience,' said the other, 'so we shall all warm up in the theatre.' He passed on and disappeared into the crowd. Alan was at once tortured by regret for what he saw had been his churlishness: in refusing the cigarette he should have explained that he did not smoke. This was an example of his frequent inability to utter the simple explanation that would give to others a totally different and favourable impression of his conduct and personality.

However, in the interval he came across the man again, his amiability not the least impaired by Alan's deficiencies at their previous exchange. 'Why don't you have coffee with us?' he said.

'Thank you very much,' Alan muttered.

'I always book one of the end seats and slip out quickly at the interval and get hold of this little corner.' He was piloting Alan through the throng and they now arrived at the advantageous table indicated, where a lady with her fair hair in a bun, wearing a silk shawl over her shoulders, was already seated. 'May I introduce you to Mrs Rawsthorne?' said Alan's companion.

Since he was deeply considering whether he ought to shake hands despite the lady forbearing from offering to do so, Alan did not regard it as the least strange that the introduction had been one-sided. His host excused himself immediately and Alan was left to lower himself into his indicated seat next to Mrs Rawsthorne. It did not occur to him to open the conversation himself, and after a few moments, full, for him, of rapid and confused thoughts, Mrs Rawsthorne said: 'Did you enjoy the Shaw?'

'Yes. Yes, I did.'

'Had you ever seen it before?'

The first part of the evening's entertainment had been *Overruled*. 'No, I hadn't,' said Alan. 'I thought it was remarkable—naughtier than D. H. Lawrence.' He felt no guilt at appropriating this phrase he had heard uttered by his neighbour as he had risen to go out of the auditorium at the start of the interval: though he realized that he would never have thought of it for himself, his approbation of it seemed to make it exclusively his own, especially as Mrs Rawsthorne laughed, considered it, and then nodded her head.

A little later she said: 'I wonder if you ought to help Jack at the counter.'

He was flooded with happiness to think that he could be legitimately released from the oppression of having to try to talk to her, and rose immediately. But he found 'Jack'—the name had struck him as ludicrously inappropriate for this quite burly and totally grey-haired man—already coming away from the refreshment table with coffee and biscuits on a tray, a privilege that seemed to have been accorded to no other patron. 'How kind of you to come and help,' Jack said.

'I'm afraid there's nothing for me to do.'

'You can tell me your name, anyway.'

'Percival.' And since he already knew the other's Christian name, he added in his most strangled voice: 'Alan Percival.'

'Mine's Jack Burton.'

For an appreciable span of time, Alan imagined that these were names like George Bernard or Harriet Beecher, implying the addition of a surname, which in this case was, of course, Rawsthorne. But as they sat down at the table he realized that his companion's surname was Burton and for Alan his character was instantly transformed from staidness to doggishness, more especially since it seemed unlikely that anyone so young as Mrs Rawsthorne could be a widow and therefore Jack Burton's squiring of her was almost certainly illicit.

'We didn't exchange names when we met before,' added Jack Burton, smiling and revealing some thin strips of gold between his upper front teeth.

Alan was baffled, and could only say inappropriately: 'Didn't we?'

'In the St Michael's Square Kardomah,' said Jack, as amusedly and triumphantly as though he had been waiting ever since to spring his surprise.

They had arrived back at the table, and while Jack distributed the cups of coffee and handed round the biscuits and Mrs Rawsthorne passed on to him the clever remark about Lawrence and Shaw, Alan had time to remember that in the first days of his coming to the town when it was his habit to go in cafés before the start of the morning's work there was once a man sharing his table whose faint display of interest in what Alan was reading proclaimed him to be a person of culture, as also in some less defined way had been his lighting his cigarette from a folder of book matches and holding the smouldering cylinder in a hand two fingers of which were tucked neatly behind the thumb. It amazed Alan that Jack Burton had been this man: he could scarcely take into his conception of life the notion that enormous coincidences were a necessary part of it.

'We must get together again some time,' Jack said, when the bell had sounded for the end of the interval. 'Is it all right to ring you up at the *News*?'

Though Alan had quickly revealed where he worked, Jack Burton's occupational activities were kept secret on that occasion, and even when Alan came to know him better he never spoke freely of what he did, as though being on the sales side of a firm which manufactured embroidered table runners, duchess sets, chair back covers, and so forth, embarrassingly contradicted his interest in the drama, his friendship with the elegant Mrs Rawsthorne, and even his collars and hat brims which were respectively higher and narrower than anyone else's that Alan had ever met. He triumphed with apparent effortlessness over other disadvantages in his life. It turned out that not only was he unmarried but also that he lived with his old mother: however, he performed this duty simply by occupying a floor of his mother's house, where he had, as well as his own sitting-room, a gas ring and a tap in a cupboard on the landing which enabled his economy of tea, coffee, and whisky to be quite self-contained. The part of the house one had to pass through to reach this apartment was completely conventional—in the hall there was a fitted carpet of floral design and in Mrs Burton's own sitting-room one glimpsed upholstered furniture so plump that it looked as though it had been inflated. But Jack's sitting-room was dominated by a shining black grand piano, and a thin fringed rug only sketchily covered the darkly-stained floorboards.

However, it was some weeks before this side of Jack's life was revealed to him, since at first they met only in the lounge of the Northern Hotel, or at a concert at the Town Hall, or at the Shed, and the mysteriousness of his existence was thus preserved. How remarkable therefore it was eventually to be introduced to Jack's indubitable brother, a stout man with a stout wife, who happened to be visiting his mother; and to see Jack sit at the piano and, in a style that could never have been imagined, play the notes that hitherto he had only talked about. On another occasion Mrs Rawsthorne was with them, and she and Jack played Mozart symphonies arranged for four hands

while Alan listened, at first in his chair and then wandering about the room behind their backs. Among the photographs over and on the mantelpiece was one of a group of soldiers standing in front of a brick wall. In the centre of the group was a thin, dark haired and moustached Jack, wearing baggy breeches and slack puttees like Charlie Chaplin. Another photograph was of the more recognizable Jack strolling across some foreign square, snapped by a street photographer, perhaps on the visit to Rome Alan had already heard about.

It struck him as extraordinary that in his bedroom at home, covering the light switch that was suspended from the ceiling so that one could turn out the light without getting out of bed, was the same little green spherical woollen jacket to prevent the switch knocking against the bed-head that had seemed to him fascinating and bizarre even in the days when it was not his bedroom but his Uncle George's. He saw now that the thing had been crocheted by the same hand that had made his grandfather's 'golfing' hats, and marvelled that his grandmother's familiar skills should have been exercised in the improbable epoch before he had come to live in this house.

After Jack Burton's sitting-room, the bedroom lacked character and comfort in Alan's eyes, and his life seemed impoverished that had failed to nourish it. Coming back from washing, he took off his pyjama trousers before putting on his shirt, feeling a satisfying libidinousness in striding about the bedroom in his vest, confident that if anyone should see him through the window he had the unbreakable alibi of having to get dressed. Besides, he could not imagine that in his case the sight was in any way offensive. He got eventually into a pair of the grey flannel trousers that he now wore every day, feeling, as he saw through the window a few richly-dressed churchgoers, a sense of mingled guilt and liberation. Oddly enough his growing Sunday carelessness in dress and increasing failure to worship had been paralleled by his grandparents: now they rarely went to church and Mr Wrigley never altered his silk neckerchiefed state until late afternoon, when the time approached of his going to the club.

Alan put on the tweed jacket that when he had first bought it had seemed outrageously loud but now barely expressed his eccentricity and dissidence. There was nothing to take him downstairs urgently. He picked his nose, thinking of the advertisement he had seen in the *Sunday Chronicle*—a list of questions with the legend: 'If you can say yes to any three of these you have the deadly catarrh.' One of them, which certainly got an affirmative from him, was 'Do crusts form in the nose?' When at length he stepped out on the landing he heard his grandfather coughing—a cough that merely rippled the surface of what seemed to be a deep well of phlegm. But this was more serious than even the deadly catarrh: Mr Wrigley was in bed with what had come of late to be his perennial bronchitis. Downstairs there was no one in the front room. Alan was suddenly irritated that they ate in this room where they mostly lived, although it was further from the kitchen than the room called the 'back room' that was now used principally at Christmas. How embarrassing it would be for him if a strange chance brought Jack Burton here and he should see the uncivilized way they existed. It seemed almost deliberately designed to irritate him, like his grandfather's coughing and his grandmother's pronunciation of 'Beethoven' which surely with some infinitesimal effort on their part could be remedied.

'Would you rather have cauliflower or carrots and turnips?' asked Mrs Wrigley, coming into the room wearing an apron, a spot of red on each cheek from the heat of the kitchen. Mary did not come in on Sundays.

'Cauliflower,' said Alan automatically. Then seeing that the question involved a real matter of taste and aesthetics, he added, though without looking up from the newspaper: 'No. Carrots and turnips.'

Mrs Wrigley sat down, her choice of an upright chair indicating the evanescent nature of her stay. 'Aren't you going to draw?'

'There's no time.'

'I needn't set the table yet awhile.'

'It's not worth putting the things out. Why don't we have a

fire in the back room?' Mrs Wrigley did not reply. Alan put down his paper and added, after a pregnant silence: 'I think I shall start smoking.'

Though he had long meditated this sentence, anticipating and dreading his grandmother's opposition, what she said could in fact be ignored without a qualm. 'I shouldn't if I were you.'

'Yes, I think I shall.' He could even afford to throw her a concession. 'Sooner or later.'

'It's an expensive habit.'

'Oh, I shan't smoke much.'

'I've been thinking that you've no need to give me the money for your board now that you're staying at Mrs Wolsten-croft's during the week.'

'But I'm here at the week-ends.'

'Well, there's the money your father left.'

'Oh yes,' Alan said, with a sang-froid that was entirely assumed since he could not remember ever hearing of this money before and which therefore seemed to have come to him as in one of those dreams about luck.

'Your grandfather put it in the Sudan. Then they didn't pay any divis for a long time, but just now they've started again.'

He pictured the red mill, its strange African name in white brick round the tall chimney that was tipped like a vinegar bottle in a chip shop, and thought how curious it was that when he had passed it on those Sunday walks of Uncle George's courting days it had partly been subsisting on his father's legacy. The notion of the irregularity of dividends from the town's mills came as no surprise to him, though he sensed his grandmother's embarrassment, no doubt on behalf of his grandfather, whose choice of investment medium had been so unfortunate. To inject some harmless generality into this dangerously personal exchange, Alan said: 'Aren't they starting to make rugs or something?'

'They've got some orders from the War Office. Anyway, they're paying a bit of something. Of course, it'll be your money when you're twenty-one, Alan.'

'Is it the Sudan where Jim's getting a job?'

'No, Joshua Hoyle's.'

'*They*'re making rugs, then.'

'Happen.'

Even so long-standing a member of 'the Arguers' as Mary's husband seemed likely to desert the ranks of the unemployed. 'I think I shall go a walk before dinner,' Alan said.

'Don't be late,' said Mrs Wrigley automatically. Then she added: 'I'm glad we've had this chat about things, Alan.'

Alan's walk was in the first place to a newsagent's shop not a hundred yards away, where, as he had long imagined doing, he bought ten Gold Flake and a box of matches. Gold Flake was a brand favoured by that devoted smoker, Mr Baker, and chosen by Alan because he considered that it concealed fewer ambiguities than Players, say, or Capstan, which were qualified by adjectives like 'medium' and 'full strength', as capable of making him look a fool as the terminology of beer-drinking. He blew a grey stream down his nostrils into the cold air and the memorable flavour, as of some rich compost, assaulted his taste and brought back the atmosphere of a dozen previously-illegal smokes. And it was true that the mere holding of the white cylinder between his first and second fingers (where it seemed naturally to belong, the fulfilment of some natural instinct, like a bird's first flight) immediately matured him, so that he imagined the passing people not, as they would had he been cigaretteless, despising him for his gentle upbringing but recognizing with admiration his *savoir-faire*. The day was completely calm and it was evident that it would never get really light. In the little park some frost still lingered behind the bushes. He wished he could be seen by the girl who was staying next door to the Wolstencrofts'. He visualized himself walking up the path, a cigarette just lit, and the girl coming out of her front door.

The money his father had left—Mrs Wrigley's phrase seemed the most concretely descriptive—gave substance to the notion he had always had of his difference from his fellows. It did not seem inappropriate that although his grandfather had had the management of it his grandmother had been the one

to reveal its existence to his adult comprehension, for Mr Wrigley's nature was of a cynical kind and this inheritance, coming down to Alan from the shadowy and mysterious days of his life at Greenhead, seemed part of the cosmos of metempsychosis and personal immortality believed in by Mrs Wrigley. It did not occur to him that he might have asked his grandmother how much the thing amounted to: that it might be translated into actual and useful notes and coin was a concept he was some long way off.

‘I haven't any grandparents on my father's side,’ he said. ‘I don't know who he was and where he came from. The only relative of his I ever heard about was his sister and that was ages ago. I think I must have some foreign blood on that side. My aunt was called Teresa and my father was called Carl.’

‘Teresa's an English name,’ she said.

He was perfectly aware that this was so but for him the name continued to have an outlandish connotation, no doubt because of his infantile conviction that it contained a ‘z’. ‘When I'm twenty-one I shall inherit my father's money,’ he went on. ‘Of course, if he hadn't died so young it would have been much more. Still, one must be thankful for small mercies.’

A continuous excitement made insubstantial the pavement under his feet and agitated his stomach. That this girl should have consented to walk with him seemed a staggering concession on her part, but his conviction of his own unworthiness did not prevent him telling her almost unceasingly of his past and his desires. When, after another accidental colloquy outside their respective front doors, he had heard himself, out of a courage he did not imagine he possessed, ask her for this rendezvous, he had immediately decided that he would take her to the Victoria Park, the town's great open space where on behalf of the *News* he had once attended some rally of trumpeting and drumming boys; though on reflection he realized that in the dark of a winter's night it would be closed, some sense of what was fitting prevented him from changing his plan. Nor did he consider taking a tram, even on the journey back, though the walk began to take on an epic quality.

Sometimes as they went along he speculated about her as though she existed at a different epoch or spoke a different language. He had deduced, from a chance remark of Mrs Wolstencroft's, what he imagined to be her Christian name: her surname remained mysterious. Her clothes, too, continued to be unlike those worn by the generality of girls: the cloth of her coat had a special eccentricity of design, its collar was of the skin of an animal extinct on this planet.

'My idea in becoming a journalist,' he said, 'was so I might get the chance of doing newspaper cartoons. That's what I always wanted to do ever since I can remember.'

'Do you do the cartoons in the *News*?' she asked.

'God, no. Do you mean the political ones or the sports ones? I don't do either, anyway. In fact, I'd given up the idea long before I left school. But then there seemed to be other reasons for going in for journalism. Do you find that sort of thing happens to you? Of course, I don't say I shall stick to journalism. It's a good starting-off ground. I might go in for politics. Or I might stay in journalism and go on the dramatic criticism side. I'm a member of the Shed Theatre here. Have you ever been?'

In the streets well lit from shop windows he felt that all the passers-by were observing her and envying him having so beautiful a companion. He was conscious, too, of how remarkable it must seem that at seventeen he had secured someone so mature. He imagined her age to be twenty, perhaps twenty-two, and for all his garrulousness he was constantly frightened that he was not measuring up to her sophistication—that she would never consent to go out with him again.

'My name's really the same as Perceval—c e v a l. He was one of the knights of the Round Table, the one who found the Holy Grail. I feel I'm still on *my* Quest, still looking for my Grail. Even the Shed's not right.' Though it was a cold night he had put on his mackintosh and not his overcoat, knowing the former to be more romantic and bohemian in its length, grubbiness and belted style. The wind glued the skirts of the garment against his shins, lifted his hair, and blew his words away from his mouth so that he had to speak very loudly as

well as, to impress his companion, carefully articulate his words in his most cultured voice. But despite these pre-occupations he was able to be surprised at the changes in himself announced by his words. 'It's full of people who go to the office every day, with a little brief case and a little bowler hat. I'm anti-fascist: are you?'

'I don't know,' she said.

'What are you?'

'I'm nothing. I'm not interested.'

'You ought to be,' he said. He began to explain things to her as though prescribing an essential diet. When they got back to her grandparents' house she marched straight up the path. He followed her hesitantly, feeling that perhaps proper conduct required him to go into the Wolstencrofts'. He called after her, trying to cover up his embarrassment: 'This fence: it looks odd painted green on your side and left dirty on mine. You'd think old Mrs Wolstencroft . . .' He caught her up in the porch. The light from the hall came through the stained glass of the inner door and with the light from the street lamp illuminated her sufficiently for him to see, with a pang of awe, as though it were an offensive feature of some predatory beast, the dark smooth skin of her deep eye sockets. She opened her handbag and gazed inside it. He could not tell whether she wanted him to stay, and he leaned against the brown-painted lincrusta of the porch wall, his legs slightly trembling from the long walk, and said: 'What are the most terrible things you've ever seen?'

'I don't know,' she said, almost with irritation. 'I don't really know what you mean.'

He thought of the idiot girl on the swing and the ape in its cage, and realized he could never tell her, never even begin to hint to her the nature of these items he had stored up. 'Anything absolutely ghastly and frightening. Anything that tells you what life is really like.'

She snapped her bag shut and said: 'I must go in.'

He searched for ingenious questions to delay her, as long ago he had delayed his own departure for bed. He imagined over and over again a series of plausible gestures that would take him across the little gap that divided them and allow him

to kiss her, but it seemed totally impossible for him to make the first of the series. He gazed down in a concentration all the more rapt for having to work against her threatened departure and his own inane chatter, but had mental accommodation enough to observe her black patent shoes against the terracotta floor tiles and to marvel how her swelling calves, in the short space available to them, were able to disappear into ankles of an indubitable slenderness.

'One of my uncles,' he was saying, 'used to go in almost exclusively for etching. Have you ever seen that done?'

She shook her head.

'You need nitric acid, gallons of it. He kept it in the kitchen. Once someone knocked a bottle of it over.' Almost with astonishment he heard himself inventing one of the somewhat pointless kind of stories he used to think to impress his colleagues with at school. At the end of it she laughed politely and he said irrelevantly: 'It's draughty in this porch. You ought to push your coat collar up.'

These words had for him nothing of the triviality of their manifest content, for they were the precise formula he had evolved during their occupation of the porch to permit him to move towards her and, under the guise of himself attending to the erection of the collar, actually to touch her. And, like a magic spell which can draw on to their destiny the most sluggish and reluctant feet, they succeeded to his terror in overcoming his rooted shyness and diffidence and he found himself close to her being which seemed to him to have extended its breathing warmth to the very garments that enclosed it. He did not, however, lay hold of the part of this mysterious ambience for which his remarks had intended to give him sanction, but instead threw his arms round her upper arms; and there seemed to him no incongruity in this, for the rehearsal of the speech in his mind and the daring purpose behind it had removed from such a word as 'collar' any trace of its normal meaning. Her lips against his were cold and soft and there came from her mouth and face a sweetness as from a baby. While in a confused and excited fashion he experienced this, he reminded himself with complete rationality that what

he had thought quite impossible had come about—that the epoch had arrived in which he kissed a girl.

When he drew away from her he had an impulse to add an irrelevant and foolish sentence to his story of Uncle George's etching, as though it had been possible to divert her attention from his outrageous action. But he quickly saw that for her the embrace had not been unwelcome, and felt a great surge of joy and optimism that made him look away from her, out into the street where across the road a few bedroom windows already showed pink or yellow oblongs under the regular and repeated angles of the roofs. He said: 'Are you doing anything on Thursday?'

'I don't quite know,' she said. 'I may have to go out with my grandmother. Shall we see nearer the time?'

Since this reply in no way constituted a rebuff, he paid little attention to it. Nor did it strike him that he might sooner have had the happiness of being with her, for the intervening days of waiting before Thursday were entirely his own conception. So, too, he did not stay now for the happiness of more kisses, but clumsily seized her gloved hand and pressed it; and bade her good night as formally as if she had been Miss Wolstencroft. As he went over the railings between the two houses he did not forget to act the part of the covert athlete, springing rather higher than the dwarf structure demanded and finishing the motion with a graceful follow-through, and even bringing to mind one of the phrases which usually accompanied this character: 'under the casual clothes the long muscles of his lean figure were as tough as whipcord.' But such gestures were perhaps more to satisfy his own sense of what was fitting than hers, for though she could not possibly observe him when he was in his own porch, he then, before going inside, flung a penetrating and comprehensive look at the stars as if at last to accept the universe.

After a lot of interior argument, for his ignorance had seemed reprehensible, he had on their walk asked the girl her surname. Thus its former mysteriousness was dissipated and attached itself instead to her Christian name, for he knew that only by

hearsay and it now seemed improbable beside his certainty about her surname. So that it was a particularly happy inspiration, when he felt impelled to write to her the day after their walk to Victoria Park, that he should think to plunge straight into the meat of the letter, without preliminary salutation, as he had sometimes seen done in the published letters of advanced intellectuals. In the envelope he wrote the indubitable surname, prefaced by 'Miss', and put the thing through the next door letter box as guiltily as if it were a bomb.

No reply came from her to this. His uncertainty about her name seemed to him to indicate the nature of their relationship. He could not be sure that she had not gone back to the town where she really lived. He certainly could not believe that his mind had any attraction for her. He suddenly cringed for his lack of *savoir-faire*, his blunt-toed shoes, his inability to dance.

Though he constantly went unnecessarily in and out of his digs, he continued to see nothing of her. On the Thursday of their tentative meeting he sat agitated and idle in the lodgers' room, not expecting her to call, not daring to go out of earshot of the front door bell. It tediously became the time when all possible pleasures of their evening together were endangered. He screwed himself up at last to the ordeal of ringing *her* bell. If her grandparents answered the door he intended to ask politely after her, as though she no longer lived there. If she proved to be available, he would express modest surprise.

She opened the door to him herself. Or, rather, he saw her face through the few inches she had opened it. When she said 'Come in,' he slipped through the aperture and found her in a dressing-gown.

'Don't come near me,' she said, 'I've got a terrible cold.'

'It doesn't bother me in the least,' he said, feeling impelled to speak as spinsterishly as possible as though to counteract the embarrassing informality of her attire.

'I was just going to bed, I felt so rotten.'

'I *am* sorry. I won't keep you.'

'It's OK.'

'We can go out another time, perhaps.'

'Oh, did we make an arrangement?'

'No, no, no.'

'Come in the lounge for a minute, anyway,' she said. 'They're out.'

He thought that to kiss her again was as Himalayan a task as the first time. But eventually he achieved it, and later, as she sat on the floor against his chair in front of the fire, he tilted her head back and kissed her many times. He put his fingers round her throat as though to strangle her and, after what seemed to him—though they were both silent and motionless—a stretch of time as prolonged and full of incident as some vital historical process, like the Reformation, slid the same fingers down the obstruction-free neck of her nightdress where they rigidly enclosed, in the manner of a clamp for holding a chemical retort, her further breast. Again a great tract of time elapsed. To him, although he heard his tense breathing and recognized that his thoughts were profound, the action scarcely seemed to have erotic significance. Despite the realism of the occasion—and he could even detect a tiny point—it did not fulfil his expectation of the cataclysmic sensation of touching a girl's bosom, and this though his long theoretical connoisseurship was amply satisfied by the high sturdiness of hers. Almost greater significance resided in the wall at which he gazed and gazed—a wall of startlingly different character to the corresponding wall of the lodgers' room next door. This was hung with a speckled and lumpy paper in bright beige, divided by a border of nigger-brown flowers into large panels across which flew a few paper blue-birds. He had time fleetingly to speculate on the remarkably dashing taste in decoration of her grandparents and to think that it was no wonder that they had so smart and pretty a granddaughter.

Her quiet acceptance of the embrace made him realize that she had invited it. The casual opening of her dressing-gown began at her lap, revealing a thin white segment of nightdress down to her slippered feet. He was certain that his left hand would be permitted, welcomed, there, but the enormity of the

action paralysed him so that his reaching fingers stuck high on her wool-armoured abdomen, in the proper attitude for the caress but ludicrously far from the target, like a diagram illustrating the wrong method of carrying out some technical process.

When she sneezed his hieratic position was disarranged, and on opening his right hand he felt sweat in its creases.

'You're certain to get it,' she said, finding a handkerchief deep in the intimacies of her dressing-gown pocket and bringing out with it an adhering scrap of cotton wool and a kirby grip.

'When are your grandparents coming back?'

'Oh, I don't know,' she said, and blew her nose hard.

He thought that her offer of her body did not make up for the lack of accord between their minds. Later, in his bedroom, he could not understand why he had not ventured beneath the skirt of the nightdress, nor why he had failed to declare his love, which in his impotent and painful pacing from window to bed to wash-stand he knew he possessed for her. How remarkable that the hour should be 1.30 and yet he should have no wish to sleep, that *Trent's Own Case* should stay unopened on the bamboo table at his bedside.

The boards of the landing creaked. For a moment he imagined that for love of him she had got into the house and was looking for his bedroom, and his heart gave an apprehensive and excited lurch. Then he heard Mrs Wolstencroft's voice call through the door: 'You've left your light on, Mr Whatsaname.'

Some phlegm strangled his reply.

'Your light's on.'

'I'm still awake,' he managed to utter. 'Reading.'

'It's very late, Mr.'

'Is it?'

But there was no reply, and after some penetrating sounds from the lavatory the house's former brimming silence was resumed. Alan hoped that Mrs Wolstencroft had observed that he had turned off his light with amiable alacrity. Anyway, the incident remained unmentioned when, not without appre-

hension on that score, he went into the kitchen to pay his rent the following evening. The smell which even faintly tinged the parts of the house furthest from the kitchen was here of such pungency that one thought it, while one's nose was still fresh to it, likely to prove unbearable. Alan was in no doubt that it emanated from Mrs Wolstencroft, and he explained it to himself (since it was habitual with him, believing implicitly in the goodwill and commonsense of human beings, to rationalize even matters incapable of rationalization) by postulating that her age and bulk were too great to allow her to bathe. Besides, her shape was so far from the human that it was impossible to conceive of her nude—to take only one example, from her hips to her feet was, unlike the proportions of his beloved's lower leg, too wide a change to be bridged in so short a space.

'I haven't got any change,' said Miss Wolstencroft, when Alan proffered his two banknotes. 'Have you, Mother?'

Though not engaged in any activity which required the use of it, Mrs Wolstencroft was seated at the table. Before responding to her daughter's request, she said: 'Dearie me today'—a phrase that sprang to her lips even when she was not required to make some physical effort and then merely recorded a passing thought of more than usual accidie. The usage was so frequent that even for Alan the words had come to seem parsable and indicative of some precise mood or state of health.

Mrs Wolstencroft went to a cupboard and took from it an Iron Jelloids tin which on opening proved to contain only copper. A different tin in a different cupboard produced the necessary two half crowns.

'She seems to be a very nice girl,' said Miss Wolstencroft, 'your friend next door.'

A blush so intense that it made his ears feel heavy suffused Alan's face. To his embarrassment was added a painful sense, as at the more heinous crimes of his schooldays, that he had been found out in a guilty act he had assumed impossible of discovery. 'Yes, yes, she is.'

'Very sad about her mother and father.'

'Very sad,' Alan replied, with false promptness. He had never heard from her anything concerning her parents.

'What's very sad?' asked Mrs Wolstencroft.

'We're talking about Mrs Hudson's granddaughter, Mother. Don't you remember I told you that it looked like Mrs Hudson's daughter was going to have to get a divorce?'

'Divorce!' exclaimed Mrs Wolstencroft, scathingly.

'This little girl isn't to blame. She's to be pitied. Lucky she can stay with her grandmother, away from all the unpleasantness.'

'I really don't know what things are coming to. I don't really. It's all that 'Ilton's fault,' said Mrs Wolstencroft, no doubt alluding to the present state of morals.

In the letter he wrote to her that day, Alan discovered a tone as censorious as Mrs Wolstencroft's—though his reason for chastising the girl derived obscurely from his reading of D. H. Lawrence, being her merely cerebral conception of sex. For since he himself had reacted neutrally in the face of her physical gifts, he felt impelled to attribute a similar character to her proffering them. Their encounter had been grotesquely different from those instinctive and sensual communions between Laurentian personae which he had no reason to think could not be achieved by properly orientated lovers in real life. 'Don't give bits of yourself,' he commanded. 'Give your whole femaleness.'

It was apparent that the Shed Theatre was far from the kind of organization Alan longed to belong to. He tried to explain to Jack Burton its obnoxious respectability, its old-fashioned intellectualism, its exclusion of the proletariat.

'But anyone can join the Shed,' Jack objected.

'If they've got the money.'

'But it's only five bob a year.'

'They've still got to pay for their seats,' Alan said. 'And besides, five bob's a fortune when you're on the dole.'

'Those chaps will soon spend five shillings on the dogs or booze.'

'How can you spend five shillings on booze when you've

only got what they have a damn week to live on?' Alan inquired. But his irascibility was mostly assumed, for it was impossible to be really serious with Jack when discussing these matters. His conservatism was as innocent and complete as if he were an aristocratic countryman instead of one who spent the major part of his life trying to sell stock to urban drapers in a depressed economy; and his disinterest in political and social matters was as profound as if he had lived in an epoch utterly prosperous and uneventful.

'They'll always find money for booze,' he said, and the tone was that of one who almost jocularly refers to the things he believes in most sincerely—the tossing in of a 'blessed Virgin' or a 'materialist conception of history' as if these were simple and self-evident propositions.

'You're hopeless,' Alan said. He had soon found it possible not only to be easy with Jack but in conversation to dominate, even bully him. They were lunching together at Jack's invitation in a haunt of the town's business men—a dark-panelled underground restaurant whose quality Alan measured by the steaks being charred and the beer coming in tankards: 'What are you going to do this afternoon?' Alan added, ready to challenge some effete activity.

'I must buy some underwear.' His voice was grave: clothes, like the state of his hair and teeth, were a topic he took seriously.

'I thought you always bought your things in Manchester.'

'Everything except underwear. Surely I can trust them here for underwear. Parkin's isn't a bad shop for underwear, in fact.'

'You're always buying things, Jack.'

'But my underwear's in rags.'

'You must spend an awful lot.'

Jack Burton squeezed the knot of his tie in the gesture that for him indicated faint embarrassment or more than normal frankness. 'I can't save, and that's a fact. But then why should I? If anything happened to me, Mother has enough of her own to live on. I like having nice things.'

'Suppose you became ill and couldn't go on working. What about when you're old?'

'Alan! Please don't be so morbid on a fine Saturday.'

'You won't face facts—in anything.'

'Are you really going back home this afternoon?' Jack asked.

'Yes, I must. I promised not to be late. My grandfather's not quite better yet.' At this culmination of a chain of untruths Alan felt himself getting hot under the ears, and took his napkin under the table and brought it ostentatiously up again. On Saturday afternoons he helped on the telephones with the football reports and results: afterwards he normally caught the train home. But he had written to his grandmother to say that today the chore would extend until the evening and that therefore he wouldn't be home until late. He intended, as soon as the football was over, to return to his digs and by accident or design see the 'friend' he had left so unsatisfactorily two nights before.

He stayed long enough in the *News* building to pick up one of the first 'pink 'uns' off the presses—the Saturday football edition on tinted paper which he bore through the already dark streets and on to the 'bus with nonchalant proprietorial pride, conscious that some minutes must elapse before it could possibly be bought by the unprivileged. It seemed to him that his early possession of it must mark him out to the world as one importantly or intimately connected with its production, and that this unusual status was raised by his extreme youth and good looks to quite remarkable heights. Swinging off the bus he recklessly combed back his hair with his fingers as the wind snatched it. In front of Mrs Wolstencroft's he hesitated scarcely a moment before walking quickly up the path of the Hudsons'.

Before he had time to ring she opened the door, and it seemed that she had anticipated, too, his intention of taking her out, for her hair had a glossiness, her dress a sombre richness, that made her appear even more exciting and strange than usual. 'Oh, it's you,' she said, and laughed from sheer *joie de vivre*.

'In person and not a moving picture,' he said.

'They're in,' she said, making a slightly agonized backward gesture with her head.

'May I present you with the football final?' He offered her the rolled-up newspaper by laying it across his wrist, in the manner of a character surrendering his sword in an historical film.

'I thought you went home at the week-ends.'

Even at this he was too diffident to confess that he had stayed for her. 'Couldn't we go out tonight?'

She tapped him with the newspaper, and said with dismay: 'I don't think I can. No, I can't.'

He began to remonstrate, but mildly, feeling that his plans could not really come to this anti-climactic end. But beneath her mood her intentions were firm. 'I can't let them down, really I can't.' Her whispering to keep the knowledge of this conflict from her grandparents seemed somehow to make her obligation to go out with them to some absurd entertainment all the more irrational. It was as though her loyalty to them proved her dis-love of him. And he had at last to come to the sickening actuality of her shutting the door and leaving him to walk slowly down the path, hideously undecided whether to go straight to catch a train or to waste some time in his digs in the hope that a shift in her mind, or some cataclysm, such as a fire consuming the hall where this whist drive was to be held, would after all enable them to be together.

Fear of an embarrassing encounter with the Wolstencrofts sent him to the station. Not until he was ascending its cobbled approach did it strike him that the cause of her excitement was not, as he had assumed, his own conspiratorial appearance but some intrigue of her own. A bowel-aching sense of urgency possessed him—to return, to see her, to satisfy himself that she was in truth merely with her grandparents. He abandoned the train his pocket timetable had told him he could go for in favour of remoter, vaguer trains, and turned and ran with swinging strides down the slope, making his hard breathing into the semblance of a nonchalant tune.

It was remarkable that he could tackle so effortlessly what in reverse had been so tedious—the bus ride, the change of buses, the second ride, the walk from the bus stop. He stood eventually at the exit of an alley almost opposite the two houses and surveyed the scene like a detective. The street was empty.

He walked to the Hudsons' door as though the sound of his footsteps might bring the Wolstencrofts to theirs. On tenter-hooks he managed a repeated pressure on the bell, and then tiptoed back to his concealment in the alley's mouth, turning round constantly in case his ring should at last have been answered.

What complications painful to him might be concealed by the absence of response! He lit a cigarette, and then, as someone passed far off, bent down to his shoelace. Eventually the weather and the objects around him began to make an impression on him of their independent existence, and he found himself on a train of thought quite divorced from this situation. He realized that he had not eaten since his lunch with Jack Burton, and he was reminded of those occasions in his childhood when, neglected or naughty, he had gone without a meal and had had to exist by eating a biscuit crumb by crumb.

'I didn't expect you so soon,' said Mrs Wrigley. 'Do you want something to eat?'

'Yes, please.' He spotted an alien hat on the hall-stand. 'Who's here?'

'Your Uncle George.'

'And not Iris?' he said, thinking as he uttered this almost automatic question how remarkable it was that his uncle and aunt's inseparableness had changed from romance to near farce.

'Grandpa's worse,' said Mrs Wrigley. Though she customarily omitted any possessive pronoun, so that only the context indicated that she did not intend to refer to her own grandfather, on this occasion it served to age and isolate Mr Wrigley in his predicament, an effect heightened by Alan seeming to detect an emotional moisture in her eye. He thought how wrong it had been for him to tempt the Fates by telling Jack Burton at luncheon that Mr Wrigley was improved—for in the realm of serious illness his rationalism failed to operate. 'Go up and see him,' Mrs Wrigley added, 'while I make your supper.'

His fear of entering the bedroom was profound, archetypal. Though it was less than a week since he had seen his grandfather, he dreaded discovering an altered visage, pain, odour.

But apart from a semi-recumbent posture and a curious redness of the upper cheeks, Mr Wrigley seemed unchanged. He greeted Alan as nonchalantly as if his grandson had just stepped in from the next room. George sat in a triangular-seated chair Alan had never before seen sat in.

'I see Rovers won,' observed Mr Wrigley, at once acknowledging Alan's occupation of the afternoon and indicating his own unimpaired attachment to the world.

'You got a pink 'un, then?' Alan asked. The newspaper circulated in all this part of the country.

'I brought one,' said George.

'I left mine in the train,' said Alan, seeming to have to lie about his amatory affairs when lying was unnecessary.

Mr Wrigley coughed—not the familiar, careless, somewhat raucous and prolonged note but a careful containment of a spasm which perhaps threatened some alarming damage. He said: 'I should have gone to see Gandhi this week.' The careful neutralism of the remark was intended to convince the uninformed listener that such was the spelling of the proper name, but Mr Wrigley was in fact referring not to the Indian nationalist leader but to a nephew called Gandy who lived no further than the coast and with whom he shared the office of executor of a sister's will. Alan had heard the jest more often than George but he was the one to laugh. Mr Wrigley did not particularly demand such a response, for the bulk of his jokes were in the nature of reflex reactions to the stimuli of his thoughts and of the words of a conversation, repeated like proverbs or famous quotations.

George put some question to Alan about the *News*: they chatted for a few minutes. Mr Wrigley had closed his eyes. He said suddenly: 'Let me lick the spoon.'

Alan looked at his uncle in alarm, but George merely observed, quite loud enough for Mr Wrigley to hear: 'He's talking in his sleep.'

It struck Alan with awe that perhaps his grandfather's remark came not from his recent life (though he was not unlikely to be about when a cake was being made) but from his boyhood, the epoch of, say, the Paris Commune. Mr Wrigley's neck was very stringy and thin and his flannel pyjama jacket was fastened at the throat by a linen-covered button that had humbly replaced the original pearl. He opened his eyes and said: 'I was Enid's executor, too. What a pity Carl died so young: he was doing very well. He might have been very well-off. He spoiled me for cigars, Carl. When he came courting Enid, we weren't very sure about him, you know. Nobody knew anything about him. But he did very well. Those Sudan shares will do very well in the end, too: mark my words.'

Alan reflected that since his grandfather was not aware of the seriousness of his illness it was not likely that he would utter anything but these faintly indiscreet trivialities. Even now the time had not come for him to admit that his life had been unambitious and indolent, that he had failed to fulfil the sensitivity of his wife; or to disclose those historical details only known by him and which would clear up some of the mysteriousness of Alan's past and, indeed, very existence.

'Where's Mother?' Mr Wrigley inquired, and again the words had an initial ambiguity.

'I think she's making something to eat for me,' replied Alan guiltily.

'At this hour?' said Mr Wrigley. 'What on earth's she making?'

'I don't know, Grandpa.'

'I wish someone would make a three-course meal for me at half past nine at night.'

'Shall I ask her to get you something?'

'Of course not,' said Mr Wrigley peevishly. 'I'm only allowed slops.'

'What have you been having, Father?' George inquired equably.

'Milk,' said Mr Wrigley. 'Milk, sugar and eggs, highly flavoured with the juice of the pine, frozen into consistency by

the power of ice, assisted by amuriated soda. Only one half penny a glass.'

It was extremely strange to see a fire burning in the somewhat impractically shaped and miniature grate of the bedroom, which previously had never to Alan's knowledge contained anything except a decorative fan of green crêpe paper, a strangeness enhanced by the absence of a kerb and the presence of the coal scuttle, implement of Mr Wrigley's 'golf', from the drawing-room. Alan saw that a moist path, indicative of sadness or a malfunctioning of the gland, ran from the corner of his grandfather's eye at an angle determined by the height of the supporting pillows. He dreaded the moment when his uncle would have to go and leave the threatened burden of disaster on his shoulders alone, and he was much relieved to hear his grandmother announce a respite for happiness and self-indulgence by calling him to come down to supper.

'The ever-open door,' commented Mr Wrigley as Alan excused himself, alluding slanderously to his grandson's appetite.

The adjustable chair in the lodgers' room at the Wolstencrofts was of dark anonymous wood with chocolate-coloured cushions. Behind its back an unreliable rod could be inserted in a disappointingly small selection of slots. In this chair Alan sat after his evening meal, carelessly without reading matter except for a copy of the *Autocar* belonging to Michael Jones who had previously departed on some celebratory pub crawl. Restlessness and lethargy seemed to possess Alan simultaneously. For some reason difficult rationally to educe from the neutral events of the previous Saturday, he felt it impossible to call next door without unbearable embarrassment and shame. Despite an ulcer on the end of his tongue, he smoked cigarette after cigarette.

When the bell rang he was so sure it was her whom he longed for that he hurried to the door, calling towards the kitchen for the Wolstencrofts not to disturb themselves, masking a throat-constricting excitement with masterly nonchalance. On the threshold he discovered with astonishment Jack Burton.

'I hope it's all right to call on you like this,' Jack said, after they had exchanged greetings.

The words reminded Alan of his obligations and he took Jack to the lodgers' room, horribly aware of its lack of beauty, personality and comfort. But his visitor seemed oblivious of his surroundings, though he might have been conceived to be extremely interested in his first visit to Alan's digs. Diagonally across the table was a 'runner' held in place by a bowl containing a wax apple and orange and a rusty pair of nut-crackers. Jack placed beside this his dark brown hat with the customary unusually high crown. The wind had disarranged one of the long wings of grey hair above his ears, so that it hung down his cheek like some untidy feminine coiffure.

'Did you do your shopping all right on Saturday?' Alan asked, conscious that this was mere fiddling while Rome burned beside the necessity of explaining away the sordidness of the room, the presence of the unintellectual *Autocar*, and above all of conveying to Jack, despite the evidence to the contrary, that he was not free that evening—for he still hoped to have commerce with next door.

'I've brought you this,' said Jack Burton, patently not in reply to Alan's question and holding out, in a hand still hog-skin-gloved, an oblong parcel.

Alan felt acutely the awkwardness of a beneficiary, and mumbled 'Thank you very much' as he clumsily took off the brown paper, uncertain whether his gratitude should not merely be modest, as for something inadvertently left behind at Jack's. What he disclosed, however, was a brand-new volume of Bernard Shaw. His first reaction was disappointment and an irritable sense of Jack's inadequacy, for he had really grown out of Shaw and possessed not the slightest desire to read or re-read any of his plays. But this was instantly followed by an obscure embarrassment as he saw that the book contained, among other things, *Overruled*.

Jack said: 'It's a memento of our first evening at the Shed.'

'Thank you very much,' said Alan again, and not a great deal more clearly.

They were standing facing each other on the stained rug

before the inadequate fire. In his overcoat Jack seemed burlier, stranger, more formidable. Suddenly Alan found himself clasped in his arms, in a world composed of his overcoat's velvet collar and his breathing rapidly through his nose. The problem of Alan's own conduct was acutely raised. In the event he remained completely passive, his arms pinioned by Jack's, the hand still holding the book rapidly becoming paralysed. He understood instantly, though it had simply never before occurred to him, that Jack was among those capable of desiring him.

'I was overwhelmed when I saw you at the Shed,' Jack was saying. 'When I used to see you in the Kardomah I never dreamt we should meet in a place where we could speak to each other. I expect you noticed how shy I was at the Shed. And I couldn't introduce you properly to Mrs Rawsthorne because I didn't know your name.'

That even in this intimate moment Jack should refer to Mrs Rawsthorne under the formal title proved his love for Alan even more than his embrace, for at last Alan tumbled to the innocence of his relationship with his chic and still attractive companion. 'It was all right,' Alan murmured, anxious to excuse one at least of Jack's sins.

'Do you know, I remember the book you were reading when I first saw you. *Brave New World*.'

Alan assumed an appropriate look of admiring incredulity though since his head was still close to Jack's shoulder it went unperceived. Another period elapsed of emotional breathing, and then he was released a little, and Jack said: 'Is there someone else?'

Alan was astonished at Jack's perspicacity. 'Yes,' he said eagerly. 'Yes, there is.'

Jack's hands were on his shoulders and gave them a little shake. 'He's very lucky,' Jack said, turning away with compressed lips, and actually moving towards his hat, and picking it up, as though with no more at stake than a foiled insurance premium collector.

Alan was disturbed less by Jack's assumption as to the nature of his love than his agonizing sense that he could not

be sure that there was in fact 'someone else' to return it, for there had been from the Hudsons' granddaughter neither the gift nor the humility which however incongruous from Jack were nevertheless unmistakable hallmarks of permanent affection. 'I'm sorry,' said Alan.

Holding his hat, Jack expressed the hope that their friendship would go on, to which Alan assented. After a pause he raised the Shaw volume, caressed its cover and said: 'Thank you very much for this.' He was struck with the notion not only of its high price but of the waste of the price.

'It's made me very happy to give it to you,' said Jack, but Alan could not help detecting in his tone a regret that seemed to emanate not from what had just occurred but solely from the book, as if he, too, had grown out of his liking for Shavian drama.

One evening when, after another week-end, the evenings seemed to have suddenly and spectacularly lightened, Alan saw outside the Hudsons' house a small red sports car. Instantly he knew, with a terrible pang, that his rival had materialized. Once again he played the role of watching sleuth and was rewarded by the sight of a hatless, scarfed, brilliantined figure whose diminutiveness did not make him the less formidable, for the very possession of a motor-car and drawing it up openly outside the Hudsons' proved the man to possess a professionalism which Alan could not imagine himself ever attaining.

After some days of agony he trapped her at last on her doorstep and inquired the man's identity. If the boorishness of his manner indicated his unformulated assumption that she would be evasive, his notion of the matter had been quite misconceived. She told him the name, the fact of her having known the man 'for ages', and of his living in her own town. That he appeared here as an exogamist yet with all the advantages of familiar acquaintance accorded with his other marks of power.

Alan gazed at the attributes of her youthfulness—which nevertheless were, and had for years been, mature enough to give him cause for jealousy—and wondered how he had ever

been permitted to begin to possess them. He made some rude and cynical remark, turned abruptly away, and made off.

He realized that she was not impressed by his rage and frustration. He, on the other hand, was tortured that night by the thought of her freedom. If he whom she scarcely knew had been permitted to hold her breast, what liberties must be taken by this dapper and assured old friend. The next evening he called on her. No motor-car stood in the street. She wore a ribbon in her hair, like a small girl, and her sleeves were rolled up: her clothes were almost shabby. She was shutting the inner door, to cut them off in their little den of the porch, when, since she seemed to him so unformidable, he seized her, though he had never expected to embrace her again. The kiss was awkward, for she still had to close the door and turn to him fully, but for his part he put into it his entire melancholy, all the greater for the consciousness of the loss she was about to suffer.

'Don't you want to see me again?' she asked, when he had confessed, in a manner awkward and oblique enough, that he couldn't love her.

His answer was an unhesitating negative, though it was perhaps the refusal of one who initially rejects the offer of a second helping of pudding—convention, pride, momentary nausea, all played their part, but when she had gone inside and he was letting himself into the Wolstencrofts' he was staggered at the magnitude of his sacrifice and the strength of his principles that had made him refuse to share so casually proffered a body. From the front room came the syncopated sound of Miss Wolstencroft counting against the laggard notes of the piano played by one of her pupils. Alan saw with relief that the kitchen was empty, but in the gloom at the bottom of the stairs he bumped into the soft, considerable form of Mrs Wolstencroft.

'I'm sorry I didn't see you.'

'I was just going to put the light on, Mr Whatsaname,' said Mrs Wolstencroft, with dubious veracity. 'I've been up to the bathroom to see if that Windsior was turned down: the water's absolutely boiling hot, boiling hot it is.'

He felt as though his breast had been stabbed through. He left Mrs Wolstencroft in mid complaint without a qualm, for he knew his hurt to be indubitably greater than hers. In his bedroom he switched on the light and threw himself across the bed. His first coughing sobs soon turned to tears, which felt in fact to be draining from his inflamed heart. He was eventually amazed at his emotional capacity, for his weeping seemed as if it would never stop. The head of feeling behind it was as powerful as behind a kiss, and in a way it gave the same pleasure and relief as kissing. When he went to the dressing-table to find a handkerchief, he observed with fascinated interest his eyelashes as irregular as wet fur and the marks of tears on his cheeks glistening like a snail's trail. But the sight of his face, as freshly and inexhaustibly handsome to him as ever, reminded him of what she had lost—his potential genius, devotion and understanding—and a fresh spasm of weeping crumpled him like a cripple.

IV

It struck him that the impoverishment of the *petit-bourgeoisie*, so confidently forecast by the political and economic writers he had read in the thirties, had at last taken place. This was what it was like to have lived in Brierley Court. Yet even in the appalling squalor he had retained a vestige of privilege. The first-class lounge of the liner had been filled, like a giant egg box, with close tiers of bunks, but in the entrance lobby from the deck there was room for only two two-bunk tiers. One of these bunks bore the number of the card handed to Alan on embarkation. He contemplated with alarm the crowded alleyways and claustrophobic layers of the main part of the lounge, and to allay the jealousy of others complained about the traffic past his bunk and the draught through the doors.

When they were under way, these disadvantages (which

initially he had almost had to exercise his ingenuity to find) became truly nerve-racking. The naval draft was given duties no doubt considered consonant with its tradition, so that Alan, although his training as an aircraft radar mechanic fitted him for the job no better than a pongo or a crab-fat, found himself a look-out in the Oerlikon gun tub on the starboard side of the bridge. The watches were one on, two off: coming from the morning watch, say, or anticipating the middle, extra sleep was impossible as the throng passed and the wind moaned through the cracks round the doors or buffeted in as they were opened.

The abuses of working-class housing, such as sharing a tap or a lavatory, seemed trivial beside the sanitary arrangements of the troopship, when such sharing was not only carried to the lengths of queues and congestion but restricted to two comparatively brief periods in the morning and early evening by the water being turned off at other times. Turned off, that is to say, in the primitive 'ablutions' erected on the decks for the use of the troops: going back to his bunk one night by an unfamiliar route after the second dog, Alan passed along a corridor into which opened at least two bathrooms, where some Army and Air Force sergeants were cleaning their razors and splashing their bull necks in abundant running water. The next night, clad only in his ambiguous white shirt and navy blue serge trousers, and with his towel round his neck, he searched out one of these bathrooms and, singing under his breath and blowing out the water with false sang-froid, had an out of hours and illegal wash. On subsequent occasions, though he never lost the fear of being unmasked, he gave a nod at a face or two that were becoming faintly familiar, and allowed himself to imagine that the sergeants, thinking him remarkably young to be a naval petty officer, would be imputing to him some unusual skill or experience. One night he saw a bath through the open door of a tiny compartment. He slipped audaciously inside and closed and bolted the door. When he turned the great tap hot sea-water gushed out. Soon he was lying in it, apprehensive of a challenging knock on the door and feeling in his prone nudity peculiarly

vulnerable to German torpedoes, a blend of pleasure and anxiety as diabolical as some Pavlovian apparatus for inducing neurosis. The ship gently rolled, air blew noisily through a swivelling contraption near the ceiling, a regular creaking came from the timbers of the compartment: experiencing all this, and seeing the shiny bottom and absence of turn-ups on the trousers that lay crumpled by the bath, he was transfixed by the sense of the lunacy of the events that had brought him here, at this time, in this role.

It had been thus as the convoy had got under way, steaming into the sun's path—the score or so of grey ships against the light sky their noses all one way and the white rolls of foam blown back on the blackish grey sea. For him it had been a sight not heroic but profoundly irrelevant. Duncan Cummings, one of the half dozen radar mechanics in the Fleet Air Arm draft, came up to where Alan was standing in the scuttle outside the swing doors to the former saloon. The prudent Duncan was wearing his kapok life-jacket almost as formally as at boat drill, and sipping a characteristically big mug of tea.

‘Where did you get that —ing tea from?’ Alan asked.

‘There are some stewards selling it at a wee opening along the deck. And the bastards are making their fortunes.’

But when Alan went to his bunk he found the mug he had been issued with missing. Two air mechanics were sitting talking on one of the adjoining bunks. ‘Have you seen a mug?’ said Alan, his voice choked with rage.

‘No, mate,’ said one, a youth with sideburns and very small upper teeth.

His companion did not reply, but bit his finger and swung his feet which were clad in dirty white plimsolls. Alan was convinced that this was the culprit. He had put him down previously as a villain, on account perhaps of his high curly hair, negroid lips, and habit of referring to everyone as a cock-sucking get. Alan marched out on deck, his teeth clenched so hard that afterwards they hurt.

He felt himself disliked by those of the draft, the rougher sort, who came in contact with him. His rating of leading hand—the result of his technical qualification rather than his length

of service—would perhaps never come to them, and he had no doubt that they distrusted his vocabulary, his looks, and his habit of finding the quietest place in the bedlam of the decks to read and write. He writhed to think of the tripe he had put in his letters, let run through his head, at his initial training establishment—about the virtues of his fellow-conscripts and his indissoluble unity with them. At the great concert of the final week, tears had ludicrously filled his eyes at the trainee playing Chopin, the Petty Officer instructor singing 'The Floral Dance'. Balls to humanity. It was smelly, ugly, thieving, doomed. It opened its silly mouth and unwilled, loud and meaningless sounds came out. As it passed him it jostled him, as uncontrolled, as careless of its body, as a member of a herd.

As they sailed into better weather the open decks became as fantastically crowded as the interior had been. A piano was unveiled on a dais no doubt used in happier times by the ship's orchestra. Here, during the daylight hours, a continuous and impromptu concert went on, in which the chief actor was an Army corporal. Most of the entertainment was obscene. On his way with his book to the tarpaulin-covered hold he had discovered to be the least-frequented part of the decks, Alan often stopped among the throng round the dais. He carried away with him not a piano's romantic cadences or a manly voice rendering a wholesome ballad, but the equally haunting six-eight of a song of innumerable verses:

*Two men in a boat,
Two men in a boat,
Two men in a boat not very far.
Two men in a boat
Stuck up a nanny goat,
Go on you bastard you've only one eye.*

It was not long before the chorus to this work, at first sustained by the corporal and his pianist alone, began to rise familiarly from the whole mass of onlookers, so that it even drifted faintly to where Alan remotely lay, his head on his

lifebelt, Duncan Cummings's legs across his, his arms awkwardly supporting a worm-eaten copy of *The History of Henry Esmond*, the most interesting work he had been able to borrow from the troops' battered and decimated library:

"Take it back to Old Mothe: Flanagan,
She's the one that can do it all right.
Wop it right into her, wop it right out of her,
Go on you bastard you've only one eye.

In the night watches the gun post became, though no less boring, more comfortable. Neither greatcoat nor oilskin was needed—merely, under his jacket, the polo-necked sweater emanating via his grandmother from the Mothers of St Luke's. His urban consciousness was enormously impressed by the spiral of the Milky Way, the stereoscopic clouds, a planet bright enough to make a reflection in the sea. In the iron-bound concrete tub he lay on his back, watching the black pencil of the gun rock against the lighter sky, listening to arguments between Duncan and another Scot about the numbers and routes of the Glasgow trams. Sometimes he half slept, the vivid past and the conjecture of his wishes fusing into a stream of consciousness so solid that, relieved by the next watch, he took it almost intact and uninterrupted to his bunk where, wrapped in a blanket, he could almost at will project his dreams on the shining veneer of the saloon wall by his head. But his erotic fancies could never be quite realized, and at last he completely lost control so that in the morning he would be disturbed by agonizing anxieties. His grandmother confessed to him that she had a cancer. He urged her to go to a specialist. 'What's the use of my having that money if you die?' However, trying to realize the Sudan shares (which in the dream he still possessed and were all he possessed) proved impossible: they were priced so minutely that the commission would swallow up the proceeds of sale. He was shaken early in the morning by the petty officer of the day: 'Wakey, wakey. Rise and shine. The sun's burning your eyeballs out.' He murmured: 'Middle watch', and pulled his blanket higher.

All were getting up: the traffic began through the swing doors, the lascar seamen could be heard hosing down the deck outside, the air mechanic in the next bunk shouted to his 'oppo' as though it were a tongue-twister he had invented: 'You've got my bastard sock, you cock-sucking get.' In spite of this Alan snatched more sleep, wakened at last by the sound of the gramophone in the sergeants' room just off the saloon, playing in the brief interim between breakfast and boat drill. It was the slow melancholy tune sung by Bing Crosby that had come to share his reflective mind equally with 'Two men in a boat'. The words came only fragmentarily to him, like those in an ancient palimpsest, filtered by the inadequacies of the machine, its remoteness, the profound timbre of the vocalist, and the general hub-bub:

*. . . that they call Jack and Jill . . .
The folks who live on the hill . . .*

When the convoy halted at Freetown an official concert was organized in the place where the toothless Army corporal had previously held sole sway. There was no black-out in the port until eleven o'clock: seeing the scattered lights of the town, some fires (no doubt of the natives of the place) on the low hills, the yellow slots and spheres of the other anchored ships, seemed like a dream made poignant by the dreamer's continued sense of reality—a sense of the war being over, contradicted by the awful purpose of the troopship. The dais on the promenade deck was brilliantly lit: in front of it rows of chairs had been arranged for the VADs and officers; the troops squatted behind them, fanning out and up on rails, boats, Carley floats, companion ways. Alan was on watch in his gun post, which commanded a view like a gallery box. He leaned out into the tropical air, indulgent towards the baritones, pianists, comic chorus 'girls', scratch jazz band. He laughed with the rest at the appearance of the ancient corporal, but in this company he was oddly diminished. The band began to play a medley of familiar songs: immediately a great waft of singing came from the audience so that only at the end of phrases, where it lagged behind the band, could

be briefly distinguished the hollow saxophone, the farting trumpet and the somewhat incongruous plonk of a banjo.

The band bowed and exited, and two middle-aged men got up from the front row of chairs and jumped on the dais, helping each other with an arm round the small of the back with the almost amatory goodwill of those who have dined well. The captain of the troopship, a somewhat broad-shouldered and long-armed man whom Alan had often observed from the gun post, introduced his guest, who proved to be the captain of the cruiser that had escorted them since the convoy's rendezvous out of Liverpool. This individual, grey-haired, grey-faced, ascetic—whom Alan craned to hear as being one of the few who, being informed about the convoy's destiny, might authoritatively end the rumours, the conflicting 'buzzes', that ran constantly throughout the ship—began as if in response to Alan's interest and after thanking the captain of the troopship for the privilege of addressing this audience, with the two words: 'Your destination'. Then he put his hands on his hips and said in a lighter tone: 'I don't know any more than you what your destination is, but one thing I do know—you're going to fight the Japs.'

Though he had obviously not been conscripted, trained and transported thousands of miles for, as the saying went, the good of his health, these words chilled Alan to the marrow, and he was seized with complete pessimism not only about his fate but also that of the entire human race. It was as though everything so far had been merely playing at going to war—even alighting from the train at the railway halt at the transit camp near Liverpool where, under the eyes of a few casual spectators on the footbridge over the line, they had humped away their hammocks and kit-bags (the latter laced up round the half protruding, fantastically enormous topees they had been issued with at the depot), a shambling, absurd and, Alan had agonizingly felt, doomed company.

'They've got a symbol,' cried the captain. 'The symbol of the rising sun. You've got to make it the setting sun.'

To Alan's astonishment applause crashed out from the amphitheatre of men far louder than had greeted any of the

items of entertainment. Yet a moment's reflection told him that the men as well as the senior officers had to be serious about the war, and imbued with hatred for the enemy, otherwise hostilities could not be carried on—just as he had been forced to realize in the thirties that there were millions who approved of the ideas of the superficially comic and negligible 'Ilton'.

'I didn't mean that to be theatrical. We English are not given to being theatrical. We take a lot of rousing. But, by God, when we are roused . . . ! Make no mistake: the Japanese are formidable opponents, ruthless opponents. We English can be just as formidable, just as ruthless. You men have got to learn that there aren't any rules in this game. You've got to shoot even when the Japanese have their hands up.'

Someone shouted out: 'That's right. No prisoners.' There was more crashing applause.

The captain went on: 'I'm glad you agree. I've told my ship's company that there will be no prisoners on my ship. Nor will they be taken prisoner. Thank you.'

The captain of the troopship then came forward to the rail at the side of the dais, resting one foot on it, holding it with his hands and hunching over it, his simian appearance making one expect the extra grasp round it of a prehensile tail. He said: 'I'm only a humble old merchant seaman. But I fly the red ensign. I fly it day and night, so that I can open fire at any time. I don't care who's on board—men, women or children—this ship won't be taken. I'll go down with that red ensign flying.'

These sentiments were greeted by applause that seemed to Alan's ears somewhat fainter than that which had gone before, but the speeches left him severely shaken. When he went off watch at midnight, he found a discussion going on in the 'flat' which the speeches had perhaps prompted. The protagonists were two marines, among a group sitting on the stairs that led out of the saloon to the deck above, but voices chipped in from all around—from the usual insomniac card-players, from some who had come off watch, and, muffled and often irascible about the noise, from the honeycomb of bunks. The air was

fetid. Alan lay on top of his blanket, the arguing voices making sleep impossible. His toes curled with impotent anger.

He soon made out that one of the marines was uttering Labour sentiments, while the other, whose voice proclaimed him to be the flat's notorious Yorkshire comic, had taken up, perhaps not quite sincerely, a position utterly cynical. The working man, said the latter, is permanently limited by laziness, lack of education, and, most of all, absence of nous. He provoked enormous laughter with his self-condemning waggery. His *vis-à-vis* went on sincerely making his points, illustrating them with apt and telling figures as though taking them from a pamphlet: when we've beaten the Japs it's up to you and me to see that there's no more war, no more unemployment, for our children to be involved in; if we British had behaved properly to the Indians we shouldn't be on this boat—there'd be an Indian army fighting the Japs.

The words kept rousing Alan like the dripping of the water torture, and in his somnolent state he was reminded of his grandfather going to see Gandy before the war, there being a perceptible interval of time before he realized that once again he had been caught by the old joke and that it was not the Indian nationalist who had been involved in Mr Wrigley's affairs. But as the discussion went on and broadened out, and Alan at last gave up for the time being the notion of trying to sleep, he found himself absorbed and moved by the testimony that rose up so voluntarily on all sides—how one had been a brickie's labourer, another a Co-op van man, and how all had been indifferently paid, had endured their spells of unemployment. They saw the conditions on the ship as a plain extension of their civilian life. 'Winston Churchill,' said a Newcastle voice, in response to someone injudicious enough to speak to the Prime Minister's character. 'He wouldn't care if we—ing *stood* all the way to Cape Town.'

When he woke the next morning he could not understand why he was so depressed. Then he recalled the blood-thirsty captains. He lay miserably, convinced that he would never return.

It cheered him a little to see the Labour marine, resourcefully carrying a bucket of precious water for his laundry, a pipe between his teeth, his weather-beaten countenance lined beyond his years, his hair brilliantineless, his eyes deepset. The typical working-class intellectual, Alan thought; a fine type. He wished he could make known his sympathy, but felt the barriers of shyness, differing class and service. They can call on me when they want me, he said to himself, convinced that the moment of the barricades would inevitably come.

Soon after they had set sail again, the RAOC draft was mustered by fidgety and officious officers on the forward deck. There was a 'buzz' that two of its number had swum ashore under cover of darkness at Freetown. The crew on watch in Alan's gun post looked on with interest. 'Shall we — off at the Cape?' said a ginger-haired leading air fitter, with a Birmingham accent, not entirely unseriously. The breeze blew, drying up some of the sweat, and the flying-fish skimmed the sea like swallows.

The relieving watch came climbing up the ladder attached to the gun post's side. 'Don't —ing hurry,' said the Birmingham air fitter, with heavy irony.

'Sorry we're late, lads.'

'We must allow them plenty of time to get their —ing tea,' said Alan with heavy sarcasm, perceiving that Duncan Cummings was actually bearing his mug, its contents somewhat reduced from their usual amplitude by the vicissitudes of the journey up the ladder.

'That's the —ing latest,' complained the air fitter.

'That's why they built this —ing gun post,' said Alan. 'To let bastards drink their tea in comfort.' Duncan's flat face came over the side. '“The fatal entrance of Duncan under my battlements”,' said Alan.

'The duty PO's looking for you, Alan,' said Duncan.

Alan's bowels suffered a pang as though he were still at school and caught out in a misdemeanor. What rule could he have broken? 'Well, he can bloody well find me,' he said, with bogus aplomb.

'What's for dinner?' inquired the Birmingham air fitter, climbing over the side.

'—ing polony again,' said one of the new watch.

Depressed, Alan went down to the former tourist class saloon. The plump steward in charge stood by the door in rather grubby white shorts, playfully slapping all the bottoms he could reach. 'Come and get it,' he cried. Even the particular variation of the general sexual proclivity that he was said to favour had been widely discussed.

'What do you recommend, Bluebell?' asked the Birmingham air fitter. 'The ox tail or the rump steak?'

'It's very nice today, boys,' said the steward. In the exciting moment of greeting the line of troops, he was as incapable of speaking the truth as detecting that his leg was being pulled.

'What's nice about shit?' remarked the side-whiskered air mechanic who inhabited the bunk near Alan's.

'Keep moving,' called the steward. Though his pale face was glossy with sweat, he seemed no more aware of discomfort or of an existence apart from this, inside the bowels of the ship, than might be an attendant demon in an inferno.

Inside the doors stood the Fleet Air Arm draft's petty officer of the day. 'Percival!'

'Yes, PO?' Alan feigned so much disinterest that he had to smother a yawn.

'Lieutenant Baker wants to see you. In his cabin.'

'Where the hell's that?'

The petty officer told him.

'Have I to go now?'

'When you've had your chow, laddie.'

The lack of urgency seemed to support Alan's sense of interested relief at the knowledge that his pursuer was in fact a commissioned officer. It continually occurred to him that the Navy, despite having trained him first to drill and tie knots, and then to understand the insides of radar sets, might eventually discover that it wanted to use him in his professional capacity. After all, they could not have called up many Fleet Street journalists. Again, from the days of his initial training establishment he had (or so he believed, for the thing was as

mysterious as some spiritual election, depending almost as much on the state of grace of the candidate as the will of the selectors) been 'in' for a commission himself, a process he had perhaps thwarted by volunteering for the radar mechanics course—the sort of error in procedure committed by an ambitious but ignorant Kafka hero. Lieutenant Baker could have news of this, or be prepared to add his own recommendation to all the chits that must have gone to the authorities before.

The cabin was tiny and obviously littered with the gear of more than one officer. Lieutenant Baker sat at a small table against the wall, smoking a pipe. The stripes on the epaulettes of his white shirt were the wavy ones of the RNVR. His brown hair was brushed in a quiff over a bulging but un-intellectual forehead.

'Sit down, Percival. Have a cigarette.'

Immediately Alan saw that only a bizarre accident separated him from the permanent enjoyment of the cabin's austere luxuries. This was where he was really at home. He felt confident and keen enough to hold his own in any conversation or course of conduct that Lieutenant Baker might propose. It came, therefore, more as a disappointment about the lieutenant's character than a realization of his own deficiency when the officer said somewhat sternly: 'I wanted to see you about some of your letters, Percival.'

It turned out that the censoring Marine Captain had passed them on to Lieutenant Baker. Though Alan had apprehended perfectly well that his letters would be censored, it was only now that he knew the flesh and blood characters involved in the operation, that he realized his naïvety and daring in opening his heart to his correspondents. The lieutenant, however, appeared to be confining his complaint to two phrases.

'You can't say "this bloody troopship", Percival. What on earth would the recipient think? Who is it, now?' To Alan's surprise—for the thing appeared to him as novel and but faintly familiar as a garment worn in childhood and resuscitated in a forgotten trunk—Lieutenant Baker consulted the actual letter lying on his desk. 'Oh, I thought it was your

grandmother. Well, there *was* one to her, and I know I shouldn't have written to *my* grandmother in such terms.'

Despite his egalitarian principles, Alan was one of those who in his practical life accepted the hierarchy of authority at its face value. Thus it seemed to him remarkable not simply that this man in the impressive and masterful uniform of a naval officer should be talking about his grandmother but that he should be human and vulnerable enough to possess a grandmother at all. The assumption, which Alan almost automatically made, of the lieutenant's superiority and unquestioned power, did not prevent him from saying, rather irritably: 'Isn't one supposed to describe one's surroundings at all, then, sir?'

'Of course they can be described, provided in point of fact you don't offend security.'

'Well, that's all I've done, really, sir. "This bloody troopship" is a descriptive phrase. It subsumes the queuing and the food and this pointless business of doing watches in the gun post.'

Tenderly the lieutenant laid his pipe down on the table, like a father putting aside an interesting book in order to deal with his fractious child. ' "The moral objection to war", ' he quoted. 'You can't say that. How can a naval rating have a moral objection to war?'

'I didn't say I had a moral objection to war, sir. I never have had. I said that on a troopship one could see that a moral objection to war might be maintained. Any state of affairs that leads to men creating conditions like these for other men could be argued to be immoral.'

'You're splitting hairs, you know, Percival.'

'The conditions are so atrocious, you see, sir.'

'A serving sailor must not criticize the Government. That's politics. Absolutely barred.'

'But, sir, seeing that there's a case for a moral objection to war isn't a criticism of the Government. One isn't operating in the political sphere at all.'

'Look at your letter, man. Here's the very word "political". And "economic".'

'Isn't one allowed to use those words?' Alan said, realizing at last that Lieutenant Baker was a dim simpleton.

'Not if you're criticizing the Government.' The lieutenant began the manly business of lighting his pipe. 'Look here, Percival, don't you see that to fight a dictatorship you've got to become a bit of a dictator yourself. I know that in point of fact conditions for you men on board are far from ideal. But they've got to get you round the Cape and shipping is terribly scarce and after all it's only for a few weeks . . .'

'Sir, I don't think even the Government would agree with your dictatorship point. Surely we're going to beat the Axis powers precisely because we're democratic and they're monolithic.'

He worked for an insurance company or a bank before the war, Alan decided, as the lieutenant put the matchbox on top of his pipe bowl to get the pipe drawing, and began: 'In point of fact . . .' Was it Fowler, Alan wondered, who rightly said that 'point of' was superfluous anyway? 'In point of fact, Percival, the thing that struck me most about your letters was their tone. My goodness, they're depressing.' The pipe clenched at one side of his mouth, Baker opened the other side and gave a few short barks of laughter. 'I should have thought you'd have had more consideration for your correspondents. I'm writing a letter myself at the moment and I try to be as cheerful as I can. Just listen to this.' He picked up a sheet of writing paper from the table and began to read. 'A few nights ago we had a splendid concert. One of my chaps did some conjuring and his tricks with cards were quite up to professional standards. It is surprising what talent steps forward on occasions like that. The concert was held in the open air, of course. The weather has been really glorious, in fact far too hot to properly enjoy our long menus, which—'

Lieutenant Baker broke off and looked at Alan as a man who has just discovered that his flies are inadvertently unbuttoned looks at his companion. However, Alan had not failed to take in the words 'our long menus', and Baker observed immediately that he had taken them in. There was a brief pause, then both started laughing.

‘You see, sir,’ said Alan.

‘I’m afraid that wasn’t a very good example,’ Baker said. ‘But I still can’t pass these letters of yours.’

Coming from the officer’s cabin Alan crossed a piece of open deck, labelled OUT OF BOUNDS TO TROOPS, where an empty folding chair stood in a favourable position. Across the green canvas back was stencilled in black MAJOR J. H. PITT-HOLDEN, R.A. Alan made his way to the congested troop decks, where, stepping across sleepers and card-players, he at last found Duncan Cummings leaning over the side. He hitched himself on to Duncan’s back and grasped him round the neck. ‘Bugger’s death lock,’ he said.

‘What did yon PO want?’ asked Duncan.

‘It wasn’t the PO, it was Baker. Objecting to something in my letters. It’s not bloody fair, you know, they’ve acres of empty deck up there.’

‘It’s no’ fair, it’s no’ right,’ Duncan said. ‘It’s a nigger’s left ball.’

Alan looked down the steep ship’s side and at the water hissing past it, a pale green, aerated liquid, like a soft drink. Though he had eaten little of the midday meal it had given him heart-burn. Nevertheless he craved for something to put in his stomach. He said: ‘Let’s go and queue up for a cup of char. And bags you go and get our mugs.’

‘I’ve got mine,’ said Duncan, tapping it where he had providently slipped his belt through its handle.

‘You canny bloody Hibernian,’ said Alan. They moved away. ‘I suppose Baker was only being kind,’ he added reflectively.

The hangar, with its accompanying store, workshop and office, was for the sake of security known as the ‘Special W/T’ section. Here the four radar mechanics of the draft reported the day after their arrival. In the workshop a native with a broom was grunting a song and raising a cloud of dust. Along the wall were the radar sets they had come during their training to know so well, but in this place taking on a slightly alarming character of serious purpose. An air

mechanic entered, apparently for the purpose of smoking a thin inch of cigarette and concealing an enamel mug behind a spare cathode ray tube. He had the specially nonchalant but knowing air of the expert in front of the tyro. Duncan Cummings asked him what happened at the morning stand easy.

'A van comes round with tea and cakes. Red Cross it is. Some wizard birds on it sometimes.'

The negro sweeper and the air mechanic in due course disappeared, and the eventless, informationless boredom characteristic of so much service life settled on the workshop. Alan kicked an empty cardboard packing case, and screamed.

'I wonder where the shithouse is,' mused Harry White, a comparatively elderly member of the party, with a bald patch and a big adam's apple, often scarred from shaving in bad lights.

'I wonder,' said Alan with unobserved irony.

At last a tall blond leading air fitter bustled momentarily in. 'Are you the new draft?' he inquired needlessly. Harry White politely answered his questions.

'My name's Facer,' said the leading air fitter. 'I'm in charge of this test shop. I shall want two of you in here, and the other two will work in the hangar. Every aircraft on this station has to be modified for ASV, so there's a busy time ahead. No farting about.'

The fourth radar mechanic, a boy younger than the rest, looked suitably depressed. Duncan Cummings, sitting on his toolbox in the background, had started an air mail letter-card. Alan squatted on the floor by him and said: ' "Dear Mother, It's a bastard . . ." "Dear Son, So are you." '

Harry White puffed at his pipe. 'I bet that bioke was talking tripe. I bet he has no say in where we have to go.'

Alan had been not unimpressed by Leading Air Fitter Facer, but now saw the weakness of what the man had said. 'Of course, we shall all work in the test shop. What the bloody hell have we been trained for?'

Nevertheless, by stand-easy, the Petty Officer of the Section, a youngish wireless operator, had told them all to work in the

hangar. There, everything that went on seemed to Alan not only beyond any skill of his but also to require no assistance from outsiders. A rigger was sitting on the hull of a Walrus, bostiking an aerial; somebody was hidden in a cockpit of a Swordfish crooning and using an electric drill; while on the grassy plain in front of the hangar another Swordfish was having its aerials aligned. At a bench running along the back Alan found the Birmingham leading air fitter, who had been on his watch in the trooper. He was industriously filing something in a vice, and Alan realized the gap that separated him from the genuine tradesman, who could so quickly find a niche for himself. He watched the operation for a while and then said: 'Is there anything for me to do, Archie?'

'Shouldn't think so, mate.'

'What the hell are you doing, then?'

'Making a paper-knife.'

After stand-easy Alan and Harry White wandered back into the test shop, for as radar mechanics it seemed to be their only possible milieu. They discovered that Duncan had preceded them to continue writing his air mail letter-card. The test shop also had the advantage of permitting smoking but Alan had scarcely lighted a cigarette when Leading Air Fitter Facer came in and said to him in casual tones: 'Take that ladder back into the hangar.'

It was only a momentary flicker of the eyes by which Alan confirmed to himself what he knew needed no confirmation—that there was merely a single anchor on Facer's shirt sleeve. 'Why don't you take it back yourself?'

'I'm telling you to take it back.' Facer's countenance had assumed a serious and determined look. He had one of those noses in which the nostrils are vertical instead of, as is usual, more or less parallel with the ground, so that Alan, confronting them across the tense three feet to which the distance between the opposed parties had been reduced, felt that it was only the gloom and vegetation of the cavities that prevented him from seeing deep into Facer's head.

'Who are you? A petty officer?' It seemed to Alan almost unfair for him to have ignored the command and to feel an

anger that completely cancelled out his normal shyness and indifference, for Facer was pitifully powerless and out of order.

'I'm in charge of the test shop,' Facer said.

'That may well be, but you're only a leading hand, and I'm a leading hand. I'm just the same as you.'

'But when were you rated?' Facer asked. The feebleness inherent in the question was apparent even to him, for he dropped his eyes and pushed a bakelite tuning key to a place of greater safety on the test bench.

'That has nothing whatever to do with it.'

'Oh yes, it has.'

'Nothing at all,' said Alan, his light tone indicating a chivalrous reluctance to press his advantage home. There were a few more exchanges of this infantile variety, and then it occurred to Alan that his allotted place was the hangar. Murmuring something not quite coherent about having a job to observe on the work bench, and even visualizing Archie Elliott's paper-knife-making as a rational cause of his going, he turned his back on Facer and strolled out of the test shop. Facer's voice called after him, but Alan pressed on, stopping only in the middle of the hangar, when the voice had ceased, to watch conscientiously a mechanic screwing on the cap of an aerial bollard.

A minute later he was summoned to the test shop by the petty officer, red and wrathful. Alan said: 'Well, of course, if *you* say so . . .' He seized the ladder; Harry White came nobly to his help, and they bore it away. Before the morning ended the new radar mechanics were ordered to fall in in the hangar, where the petty officer, in offensive manner, told them superfluously who was in charge of what. And he added: 'You aren't *proper* leading hands, you know. You've only been rated up to make your pay up.'

At the end of the harangue, Alan said, in a voice that seemed to him to tremble too ludicrously for the question to be other than ignored: 'What do you mean, PO, that we aren't "proper" leading hands?'

The petty officer strode up. Whether he had been flying or was going to fly that morning or whether he merely wore the

thing to reinforce what he perhaps imagined his trade badge too modestly proclaimed, a flying-helmet lay softly in the nape of his neck, the Y lead from the earphones hanging on his chest with the appearance and indefinable authority of a stethoscope on a physician's. 'How long have you been in the Navy, Percival?'

'Fourteen months.'

'There you are. How can you be a proper leading hand in that time? In peacetime a bloke waited seven years or more for his hook.'

It was not so much to establish his own position as to defend the educational and hierarchical system of the Navy that Alan proceeded to demolish this proposition of the petty officer's, for though he had been conscripted with no illusions about the Government's ideology and with a dread of a communal and perhaps painful life, once part of the Service he felt an indulgent respect for its laws and an irritated pity for its faults, as though for a parent. And it was a tribute more to the traditions of the Service rather than to Alan's persuasive powers that quite soon the petty officer—who was a regular serviceman—handsomely admitted that he should never have made his invidious differentiation between leading hands.

A not inconsiderable part of the petty officer's persona at first eluded Alan's identification (like those puzzle pictures designed for children to discover mistakes, where, for example, a hyena has been given a lion's head), and he imagined that the man's authoritative and impressive air was wholly a matter of character. Then he realized that the petty officer was wearing an officer's cap. On its band was sewn, of course, a petty officer's badge but the peak that projected below it was altogether more massive than the peaks of other petty officer's caps, and the crown was almost of a dinner plate amplitude. A third figure in the ruling clique of the 'Special W/T' section—an anaemic, red-eyed leading air fitter, regarded by the PO, Facer and himself as the genius of the test shop—also affected an ambiguity of dress, but of less intimidating character than the PO's cap, being merely a set of brass petty officer's buttons sewn on his bush jacket, in

mild anticipation of a rating that was said to be coming through.

The initial encounter with Facer and the PO induced in Alan a sense of being oppressed, but a rearrangement of accommodation brought Facer into Alan's mess and the hazards of domestic existence made some sort of commerce inevitable. Hanging about the 'ablutions' early one evening waiting for the water to come on, Alan found himself next to Facer and could not help amiably remarking: 'Next to eatable food, the chief thing wanted on this station is a regular water supply.'

Facer agreed.

'Or perhaps before regular water a supply of bumf in the rears,' Alan said.

'As a matter of fact, I buy my own private supply in the town,' said Facer.

'Do you really?' Possibly there really was some ability in Facer.

Later, in the mess, he told Duncan Cummings of this evidence of Facer's resource. 'He's quite human,' Alan added generously.

'Aye.'

'Even PO Hind can be human. You'd be bad-tempered if you had to run that bloody "Special W/T" section.'

'Aye.'

'You don't sound convinced.'

Duncan turned round from the business of putting a cake, bought specially for the purpose at the morning's stand-easy, in the pocket of his number three jacket which hung on a nail conveniently at his bed-head, so that returning later that evening from shore-leave in the town he would have something before going to sleep to appease his perpetual hunger. He said: 'I think they're all a lot of shits.'

'Linley's a shit, I dare say,' said Alan judiciously. Linley was the great radar brain, the anaemic air fitter of the test shop.

'They're a shower of Nazis. Have ye no' obsairved they're all blonds?'

It was true that Hind had a sandy quiff, Facer a fair

brilliantined cap, Linley floppy, waving golden locks, and the officer in charge of the section, the weak giggling pilot, struggling pale hairs round his premature baldness. 'You think they're an Aryan cell planted by Hitler in the British Navy? I see your point, Cummings, but don't you think their sabotage of the war effort is too crude for the Germans?'

'It's you they're sabotaging.'

'Me?'

'Today, for example, Hind gave you that Walrus job ten minutes before secure.'

'Well, somebody had to—'

'Then you had that half day stopped.'

'Other people have had a half day stopped. Haven't you heard there's a war on?'

'Yon Nazis are sabotaging you, Alan, and tha's a faact.'

Of course, when it was pointed out, Alan reflected afterwards, by a detached observer, one saw it at once. But it struck him that since his whole existence now was in a sense the result of victimization, a little more could scarcely hurt. Indeed, it added a faint interest to the long days spent in idleness or attempting work for which he was untrained and unfitted, to feel himself a marked man. Sometimes, seeing Hind's quiff, or the gargantuan peak of his cap, towering among some group in the hangar, or fascinated yet repelled by the open vistas of Facer's nostrils, a little area of hatred would boil in his stomach, but it quickly died down. It was not impossible, in fact, for him to find some facets of the clique to pity—Hind's manifest ambition, for example, trying to thrive on the deficiencies of his regular service background. Once or twice, lying contorted in an aircraft fuselage, grazing his knuckle by slipping with his screwdriver off the head of a screw or conceiving it utterly impossible to squeeze in the tray for part of the ASV set in the position indicated by the mod. leaflet, he would rasp out some feigned sobbing quickly changing into consciously insane laughter, and he would see himself as part of a quite farcical world, where the machinations of a Hind or Linley were no more or less significant than the rhetorical speeches of a Churchill or the British disasters in the Far East.

On the bench at the back of the hangar he, too, occupied the hours by making himself a paper-knife out of aeroplane wire. With the others, he kept his tool box on the bench and never thought to leave it locked. When his round-nosed pliers and handiest screwdriver were missing he imagined he had left them in an aircraft and actually went out on the airfield and searched the interior of a Walrus made searingly hot by the morning sun. And then when he came to use his centre-punch he found it blunted. He had when a child for years mistakenly thought that the soap always in use at his grandparents' was called *cold tar soap*, and at first he toyed with the idea that his conception of centre-punches having points was equally erroneous, that they served some completely other purpose. Then, rather more sensibly, it occurred to him that the centre-punch issued to him with the other contents of his tool box was one of a batch of duds foisted off on the Navy by an unscrupulous contractor. It seemed mere paranoia to conclude that like the missing pliers and screwdriver, the mutilated punch was evidence of malice or hatred.

One day there was a ceremony marking the official taking over of the air station by the Royal Navy. Though it was barely a month since Facer had told him to shift the ladder, Alan felt to have been on the station for years. At morning stand-easy everyone moved from the hangars and workshops back to the messes to 'clean' from overalls into Number Ones. A popular ditty rose along the strip of tarmac that led to the wooden mess huts:

*This is my story, this is my song:
We've been in commission too —ing long.
Roll on the Nelson, the Rodney, Renown—
We used to sing Hood but the bastard's gone down.*

Though he did not join in this anthem he did not doubt his right to. The sadness of an exiled legionary filled him: looking on the dramatic distant hills, the strange birds dotting the wings of a tethered Swordfish, the dark faces of some passing

native troops, he thought of his grandmother getting old in his absence, and the pity for her turned to pity for himself, so that he became almost physically sick at the idea that there was here no one to love him or take care of him.

On the parade ground everyone was stifled in their blues. A strange petty officer and a lieutenant came round to look at them. The side-whiskered air mechanic who had been on the troopship was standing near Alan, his round white cap tilted to the back of his head. The petty officer said to him: 'For Christ's sake get a hair-cut tomorrow. You look like a rat peering through oakum. Put your cap on straight and hide some of those bastard curls under it.' A long time passed. All were awaiting the arrival of the Commodore of the Royal Naval Air Stations in the African Theatre. A guard of honour fidgeted by the Regulating Office, and a rating stood ready to run the ensign up the wee mast that in fact Alan had helped to erect the week previously, having been lent by the Special W/T section for that purpose and as part, he did not now question, of the campaign by PO Hind to demoralize him.

From behind, Archie Elliott's complaining Birmingham voice arose during a particularly eventless spell: 'And I could have been making a knife.'

Though in reality he was completely without illusions as to the character and purpose of the British war effort, Alan gave vent to a sudden patriotic indignation. 'It's a bloody scandal,' he said to Duncan who was occupying himself by clipping his finger-nails with a vicious little machine.

'Aye, it is that.'

'The Russians are taking on most of the bastard Germans and we're standing here.'

'Aye, and d'ye know the difference between a horse's eyes and a woman's eyes?'

'I'll buy it.'

'Ye have tae get off a horse to see its eyes.'

At last the parade was called to attention and eventually a quavering pipe announced that the distinguished visitor was crossing some invisible line that marked for the organizers of the affair the notional side of the 'ship'. Alan held his chin in,

kept his folded hands well back on the sides of his thighs, was conscious of his smartness even in the regulation Number Ones. He thought it not unlikely that the Admiral—who after all could not have achieved that rank without some powers of discrimination—during his passage along the ranks would stop at him, and he imagined answering the stock questions: what's your name; where do you come from; what did you do in civilian life? How unexpectedly interested the Admiral would surely be with the answers, for even Alan himself had never, partly perhaps because of its Arthurian associations, partly because of the mysterious origins and character of his father from whom he had inherited it, become disenchanted with his surname, while the concepts 'London' and 'Journalist' had all the glamour of the sophisticated and the unfathomed. He fancied that the Admiral, intrigued by their brief but pregnant encounter, would afterwards ask the CO of the station why Leading Air Fitter Percival was languishing in that role in this place. The CO would call for Alan's papers and find that as long ago as the days on the East Coast of squad drill, boxing the compass and learning how to tic bends, he had been a 'CW candidate'—that somewhat monastic term used in the Navy for one who has been marked for possible commissioned rank: then it would naturally be arranged for Alan to return to England to sit his board. Alan visualized himself, after that, walking in naval officer's uniform to his grandmother's house and was staggered at the effect his appearance would have on the neighbours, on the keeper of the little park opposite, on Mary and Jim, even on Mrs Wrigley. His pulse pounded as excitedly as though the confrontation of his undistinguished past by this elegant, heroic and authoritative figure was already happening. He smiled to himself at the thought of wearing a cap with a peak and crown as masterful as PO Hind's—but wearing it legally and with a cap badge—golden and of truly massive size that would draw from Hind (and Facer and Linley) salutes which he scarcely knew how he would manage to acknowledge.

When it rained and the squadron was unable to fly, there was

absolutely nothing to do. Someone made tea and it was drunk, and then most looked out of the door and windows of the hut, staring at the rain, which hung over the palm trees like a white cloud. Alan was seized with an alarming sense of claustrophobia: he felt he would never get away from this remote and torrid place. As often after an accident in no way caused through carelessness, he felt that if he had in some way taken greater care being sent here could have been avoided. And then since he had only been sent to lecture the flying crews on IFF it seemed a deficiency on his part that had caused the Squadron CO to seize him and make him almost one of the squadron. Of course, since Alan felt himself going rather mad, it was no wonder that Lieutenant-Commander Theobald was unbalanced. Many of the other leading characters of the station had cracked, too. Alan himself had seen the Master-at-Arms beat his breast and complain in a voice as agonized and loud as a prophet's: 'Me the joss man, and they come and ask me for soap!' And all were as deeply concerned about their health as a hotel lounge at a spa: dysentery and malaria sent one into hospital to become a great-eyed, slow-moving shadow. The days when he did ASV mods under the régime of PO Hind seemed to Alan idyllic and unoppressed compared with these.

Charlie Fowler came out of the electricians' and riggers' section of the hut into the W/T section, sat down, lit a dog-end and looked at Alan with his head cocked on one side. He said, in a voice that Alan would formerly have called 'Cockney' but having listened to it so long now thought of, as precisely as Shaw's Professor Higgins, as 'Hounslow', knowing that that was the district of Charlie's birth and nurture: 'Tell us a yarn, Alan.'

'I don't know any.'

'Yes, you do. Tell us about some of the exciting times you had when you was a journalist.'

'I didn't have no exciting times.'

'Yes, you did. Tell us about some of the famous people you interviewed.'

'I never interviewed any famous people.'

‘Go on. What about Amy Johnson?’

‘I spoke to Amy Johnson—or Mrs Mollison, as she then was—for thirty seconds through the half-open door of a hotel bedroom.’

‘Tell us about it anyway. Tell us what led up to it, how you was sent out on the story, and all that.’

‘All right,’ Alan said, and began to dredge his memory for experiences which he might be able to make interesting for Charlie. He saw that his life, unlike some lives, did not fall into neat, compartmentalized anecdotes, but was full of anti-climaxes, loose-ends and utterly uneventful passages.

Some days, drawn out in his turn by Alan, Charlie would talk about his life before he was called up: his job as a Post Office electrician, his relations in Hounslow. His mind often took a fantastic turn: once he sardonically outlined the plot of a novel he said he was going to write. ‘The story opens,’ he said, ‘in a naval air station in the tropics. They call it an air station but in fact it is just a clearing of swamp in the palm trees. It is raining. There is a rating called Charlie Fowler who in civvy street was a useful, hardworking tradesman. There is another rating who was a journalist in Fleet Street and who never did any hard work or anything useful but just used to invent interviews with intrepid birdwomen and all that. Even after he joined the Andrew he still did no work, just poking his bastard screwdriver into ASV sets, preferring to pick the brains of the honest, useful tradesman, Charlie Fowler, and at the same time he despised this Charlie Fowler, because Charlie Fowler was only a rough diamond.

‘Also on this naval air station is a Master-at-Arms, a jaunty, a joss-man, who has a down on Charlie Fowler even more than the down he has on the rest of the erks. A messenger comes through the pissing rain and tells Charlie Fowler he’s wanted in the jaunty’s office. “What the hell’s it for?” asks Charlie Fowler. “I don’t know,” says the messenger, “but I fink you’re on a charge.” “What bastard charge?” “Could it be somefink about breaking your bed again?” “It —ing could,” says Charlie Fowler. “That bed was u/s when I first climbed into it.” “That’s it, then,” says the messenger, “you’re

on a charge for breaking your bed." "Breaking my bed," says Charlie Fowler bitterly, "and we're supposed to be fighting a bastard war." But he has to go off through the pissing rain to the 'orrible jaunty, who puts him in the Commander's report and he gets seven days' stoppage and the idle journalist only laughs.'

'Do you know, Charlie,' interrupted Alan, 'I think it must have been you who asked the joss-man for soap.'

'And so it goes on,' said Charlie. 'The jaunty puts him on more charges and the Fleet Street journalist laughs and gloats and Charlie Fowler can do nothink about it. Stoppage of leave, then the glass house, then Devil's Island. Time passes. The war is over. Charlie Fowler and the journalist both get out of this mob, and then even the jaunty's time expires and he gets out. More time passes. The scene is Fowler Grange, and Lord Fowler is there sitting in a coat with an astrakhan collar, stroking his jasper moustaches. A bloke comes in with some jellied eel on a gold plate and puts it in front of Lord Fowler and Lord Fowler sees a bit of old dried jellied eel from a previous occasion adhering to the underneath part of the plate, and he says: "Who washed this plate up?" The major-domo says: "The poor old dishwasher what washes everything up in Fowler Grange." "Well, send the bastard in." The Fleet Street journalist comes in and Lord Fowler says to him: "You're a worse bastard dishwasher than you was a journalist. I'm giving you the push." The journalist goes down on his knees but it's no go. Then Lord Fowler has a butcher's out of the window and sees a bloke pulling a cart across Fowler Park and says: "Who's that bastard blot on the landscape?" The major-domo says: "The poor old shit-shoveller what empties the cess pit." "Bring my binoculars," says Lord Fowler and when he takes a butcher's through them he sees it is the joss-man pulling the cart, so he goes upstairs and has a good shit.'

One night after there had been a delivery of beer and they had drunk their rationed bottles, Charlie said to him: 'When you first wrecked up in this mob I thought you was a real toffee-nosed bastard.'

'Did you?' He was much surprised, since he had never conceived Charlie to be in the Facer or centre-punch damaging category. He thought about his character, that caused him to give this impression. He said: 'I thought you were a cock-sucking, Hounslow get, and I still think so.'

'How do you come to use such shocking language when you was brought up in the lap of luxury?'

They were sitting on an oil-drum outside the mess. The moonlight caught the high leaves of the palm trees, which made a noise in the night breeze like shaken tinfoil. 'When the joss-man's had his ration they say he goes out into the jungle to sleep it off,' Alan said, knowing that Charlie liked to talk about his persecutor.

'I know. He strips himself bollock-naked first. Next morning he staggers out, covered with creeper and such-like crap. Someone saw him.'

'It's a wonder he doesn't get malaria.'

'Mosquitoes won't bite the joss-man, boy. He bites them.'

Lieutenant-Commander Theobald had two tufts of ginger hair growing out of his cheeks below the eyes. He was regular Navy and possessed demoniac energy. No doubt it was he who had pulled the strings to get someone sent to this remote station to talk to his officers on radar, and perhaps, with the unreasoning acquisitiveness of the Empire-builder, was preventing Alan from being sent back. Certainly he tried tirelessly to involve Alan further in the squadron's affairs. He summoned Alan to the squadron office where there was as much bustle as if the squadron were about to go into action. Theobald sat at his desk in his cap, flanked, as in a painting of some great military commander, by standing officers holding papers. Behind him on the wall was a blackboard showing the state of the squadron's aircraft. On other walls, as though these, too, involved the squadron, were maps showing the Russian and North African fronts. 'Ah, Percival,' said the Lieutenant-Commander. 'Stand at ease. When the squadron was at its previous place I had an IFF set modified to send out a continuous signal, and then we put it in the middle of the airfield

so my aircraft could home on it. Got it? I want you to do the same for me here, Percival.'

The terror of the unknown filled Alan. 'A modified IFF set?' he said, playing for time. 'Is the leaflet available here, sir?'

'There's no leaflet, man,' said Theobald. 'All you want is a couple of oojahs.'

'What, sir?'

'Condensers.'

'I'm afraid we haven't any spares here.'

'Is all the special W/T equipment on this station in working order?'

'Well, sir.'

'Of course it isn't. You'll have to cannibalize something, Percival. Don't be so dim, man. Now cut off back and get going.' Lieutenant-Commander Theobald pronounced the word 'bayck'.

Alan felt as he had once at his infant school when ordered to do 'transcription', a word he had never before encountered—a sense of alarmed helplessness and deficiency. He tried to forget the conception of a modified IFF set, and began to avoid encountering all officers as he walked about the station in case any should prove to be Lieutenant-Commander Theobald, who would thereby be reminded—not that his keenness necessarily needed such prompting—to ask for the radar beacon that he fondly thought was being constructed for him. Alan found that a good part of the morning could be consumed in safety by waiting to see the MO. The sick waited in a go-down in large numbers. Alan's complaint was a discharging ear which the doctor, by poking about in it, very soon made worse.

'What have I got, sir?' asked Alan.

'Tropical ear,' said the doctor, a serious man, little older than Alan, with noticeable blackheads.

'Is it—serious?'

'No, no. All ears are tropical in the tropics.'

It was in this go-down (where he sat sweating gently, reading a copy of *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*, as worn and deficient in pages as some volume printed by Caxton, and to

whose perusal he had been driven by a shortage of the printed word as grave in this as in any jungle in the continent), that there came to him a messenger who asked him if his name was Percival and on being told, said, 'Thank bleeding Christ. I've been down to the bleeding airfield and back. You're bleeding wanted in the office.'

'Where are you from? The Squadron?' Alan asked, he was sure superfluously, for it was plain that Lieutenant-Commander Theobald, weary of waiting for his modified IFF set was setting machinery of oppression in motion.

'No, mate. Bleeding RPO's.'

Alan's alarm increased: Theobald must have made a disciplinary matter of his defection. But when he went to the office he was told that he was on a draft for the UK. The machinery for his commission had started to life again. He stood trembling with excitement in the roadway by the collection of administrative huts—where even now the kit-bags and hammocks of some unlucky new arrivals lay—and was staggered that already this was part of the past. The completely different life that every man must long for was within his grasp: he resolved in the future to be powerful, unyielding, sophisticated, cruel.

The first days of donning his new uniform almost entirely lacked the pleasure he had often anticipated. He was worried that the shoulders of the greatcoat were not ample enough: sometimes it seemed to him that the old established naval outfitters he had gone to were so hide-bound by tradition that they were persisting with a cut fashionable not in this but the last war. It was over the greatcoat, too, that he had sustained a sickening shock: brushing down the skirts of it, he discovered that the ancient and inefficient tailors employed by the outfitters had neglected to give it a hem. He awaited the opportunity during the cares of the preliminary training course to return the thing, rehearsing the words he would use to insist on the omission being rectified while he waited, for he could scarcely walk about in an English winter, his blood thinned by his year and a half abroad, without a greatcoat. The

lightweight cap, too, whose virtues had seemed so outstanding when enumerated by the salesman in the outfitters, now seemed to have only one characteristic—a deplorable and amateurish rigidity of the crown, as in a bus-driver's or gas-meter-reader's cap. He had bought his collars from the barracks' clothing store, dazzled by the advantageous price, but they proved to be the kind that, while opening narrowly, failed to support the tie knot at the apex of the opening, so that it lay instead half-way down or, indeed, actually below the collar stud, in the manner as it might be of a Sunday-garbed yokel unused to collars and ties.

Yet by the time he had joined HMS *Resistance* for his technical course, troubles of this kind were mostly at an end. He had heard with delighted surprise another new officer boasting of the bottom of his greatcoat that the unique craft of the tailor had left unhemmed, so as to allow the thing to hang properly. In one of the wardroom lavatories he had found a circle of wire—evidently discarded by an officer also dissatisfied with the crown of his hat—and its being less in diameter and bulk than the cane circle in his own hat gave the latter, when he made the substitution, a quite satisfying hint of limpness and long service. And he acquired some dashing collars, the points cut back towards his shoulder blades and with an enormous gap to take the tie knot.

Resistance was a collection of huts not far from Northampton. Its considerable size and complexity of organization indicated the remarkable growth the training of radio and radar mechanics had made while Alan had been abroad. He had left the thing merely occupying a fraction of an air station on the south coast, run by a sub-lieutenant recruited straight from a factory research laboratory and under the charge of the station's own training commander. Now the sub-lieutenant had two and a half stripes and seemed to have acquired a grosser body, redder face, and more eccentric habits to go with them. A race had sprung up of instructor petty officers—mainly men whose experience of the Navy had been restricted to passing through *Resistance*; clever, comfort-loving, ex-grammar-school boys whose destiny since call-up had been

the radio and radar world and had never lived in the slums and dangers outside it. There was a smug atmosphere at *Resistance*—even its name was twee, with the heroic play on the word for a common radio component.

A number of the officers in Alan's class had come straight from the ranks of *Resistance* instructors or from civilian life: among them he seemed of infinite experience and world-weariness, his brand-new garb cloaking not as in their case, pride, ambition, triumph, but the revolutionary heart nurtured by his years on the lower-deck. Walking past the ratings under training, acknowledging their prompt salutes (the place was notorious for bullshit), he felt disguised, a spy yearning to reveal his true allegiance. At first he imagined that the tan acquired in his long voyage home would mark him as one who had suffered and understood, but its final traces soon faded in the February cold, and at last he was left with merely a discharging ear as evidence and gain of his service abroad.

He was amazed to find half a dozen WRNS officers in the class, but like one confronted by unusual luxury feigned to take the situation with blasé aplomb. He saw immediately that one of them was outstandingly attractive, a girl with limp fair hair pensile from her tricorne and pale blue eyes under dark brows. At first, in the confusion of initial roll calls, he imagined that she was called Pilkington, and the name, previously one of those to be disregarded, if not despised, took on for him a quite inappropriate glamour, like the name of a lowly club that succeeds in reaching a late round of some important sporting competition. However, on a list on a notice board he saw 'Third Officer W. Pilkington', whereas he had heard the fair girl called 'Ann' by the others, and the word 'Pilkington' reverted to its properly absurd status. After some gathering of clues he discovered that she corresponded to the concept 'Third Officer A. C. Best', also familiar to him from the lists of those down to visit radio factories or attend a day's fire-fighting course, but which, if it had signified anything at all to him, had tended to denote a diminutive WRNS officer with the faintly bowed legs of the born soccer player.

Though in a sense he conceived all pretty girls to be

designed for his possession, in the practical realm he realized that he was far too late on the scene and humble in status to do any good with Ann Best. Because of their limited numbers there was a faintly incestuous quality about all radio and radar mechanics—indeed, about the Fleet Air Arm as a whole—but in Ann Best's case the thing was exaggerated by her looks and by the fact, as Alan soon discovered, that she had only quite recently been at *Resistance* as a rating. Accordingly he sometimes saw her by the parade ground or outside a classroom being engaged in talk by nondescript leading hands as well as officers. Even the training lieutenant-commander could be seen to pass a word or two with her, thereby betraying what seemed to be his sole human concern. She was acquainted, also, with several men in the class, who spoke of her in the irritating manner that implied an intimate knowledge of the past without proving their present familiarity.

This ample social life of hers reminded Alan of his first absurd love affair with Madge (what was her surname?) Farebrother, when at the first appearance of a rival he had sheered quickly off, full of pride at his own simple honest soul that disdained such adjuncts to his wooing, full of despair at his lack of mastery of the processes that brought one to woo in a motor-car, and he marvelled that despite the passage of the years and his present possession of money and a sophisticated, not to say romantic, garb, he still felt abashed before female pulchritude—though his awe of Third Officer Best was not simply on account of her beauty but also because he automatically credited her with an intelligence to match it.

He was so convinced of her critical discrimination that he conceived it merely her indulgence that laughed with the others at the facetiousness of one of the Schoolmaster Lieutenants who lectured them on the mysteries of ASVX—or, indeed, prompted her to participate in the more ridiculous activities of the course, for he could not imagine anyone forcing her, for example, to practise left and right turns on the march. So when one evening he found himself next to her as he walked out of the camp cinema, his wish (though he felt the excitement of being able to measure for the

first time her height against his own) was to edge unobserved away, ashamed at being caught wasting seventy minutes of his life at an American musical film. When he saw that she had seen him he said quickly: 'Ghastly, wasn't it?'

'Oh, *no*!' she said, before they were separated by the throng.

He was with a member of his class called Bob Entwistle, a rather taciturn, pipe-smoking, former bank manager to whom, it seemed to Alan, the notion of trying to pursue a girl at this time and place would be quite alien even had he not been already married, as he was. Alan tried not to desert Bob while at the same time positioning himself so that he might have the chance once again of speaking to Ann Best. He felt the unpleasant anguish of this divided obligation.

'I think we might have time for a rubber before we turn in,' Bob said, holding his pipe clenched in his back teeth.

'What?'

Bob repeated his remark. He wanted nothing more than to spend his evenings playing bridge, but had no doubt come to the cinema to get his money's worth out of the extremely modest price of admission. They were now in the sharp open air. Under the moon the blacked-out huts looked uninhabited. There was some horse-play and a crescendo of conversation before the crowd dispersed. The WRNS quarters and the wardroom lay in the same direction, but to Alan's heart-hurting disappointment Ann and her Wren companion were not encountered again. Rolling along at his side, Bob Entwistle's solid maleness seemed peculiarly boring.

Alan formed the opinion that out of all her acquaintances Ann perhaps favoured most a classmate of theirs called Spanswick, and Alan conceived a distaste for him as strong as for Facer or Hind in the old days of doing ASV mods. Despite his youth, Spanswick had a face which somewhat imperfectly masked the skull beneath: his teeth were not only revealed when he grinned, but seemed to be perceptible when the wide, thin-lipped mouth was shut, and his hair was a mere token lick of shining paint on his knobbed scalp. Though as a scientist of some kind he had come straight in with his commission, he had

acquired an absurdly effective service protective colouring in the few weeks of the preliminary course—as when he sauntered up to the anteroom bar at *Resistance* where Alan was standing, and said: ‘Hello, Percival. Have a drink.’ Since it seemed ridiculous to be cool to a man who could not possibly know the reason for the coolness, Alan assented. Spanswick said to the steward: ‘I vo pinks’—assuming without a tremor that Alan, too, had formed an automatic preference for the naval officer’s favourite drink. It was on this occasion, too, that Alan discovered that Spanswick was married, but instead of the revelation encouraging him to dream of Ann’s availability it seemed evidence to him merely of her depravity—for he thought it unvirtuous of her to choose a man friend on any basis except that she might eventually marry him.

So he continued every day to see her, even perhaps to speak to her, without making the slightest progress towards their greater intimacy. He was reminded when he himself was pursued by Jack Burton: her ignorant indifference was like his own then, Jack’s frustration like his own now. Sometimes as he sat playing bridge in the anteroom in the evening (Bob Entwistle sitting opposite him, doggedly serious about the question of winning or losing at their penny a hundred game) he would suddenly wonder with a pang what Ann was doing. If he could hear Spanswick’s mock Dartmouth voice his agitation would die down, but in Spanswick’s absence he might have to pretend to go to the lavatory and in the privacy it afforded make aloud his simple wish or call himself a bloody idiot.

Yet, after all, not many weeks of the course had gone by when one Sunday morning he found himself standing next to her near the anteroom door as they waited to go to Divisions. ‘I hate Sundays,’ he said.

She was buttoning her gloves and it touched him that these, too, like the rest of her uniform were a simulacra of those prescribed for naval officers. ‘Are you going without a great-coat?’ she asked. ‘It’s freezing.’

‘After my months on the Murmansk run, this is nothing!’

She looked up at him for a swift glance before smiling and again he was touched to think that for a split second she had perhaps thought him a hero of the Russian convoys. 'You were in Africa, weren't you?'

Though his surprise was extreme he asininely imagined it proper behaviour to hide it from her, as if it were the most natural thing in the world that she should know his history, and he nodded seriously and enumerated the various stations of his service. Only when Third Officer Pilkington and then Bob Entwistle had joined them, part of a general exodus towards the parade ground, did curiosity start to gnaw at him, but by then it was too late to interrogate her as to her source of information about him and—even more shaking—her motive for acquiring it.

The wind blew the Chaplain's ropy locks and surplice as with truly religious fortitude he said some long prayers. Alan gradually turned his neck to survey surreptitiously the Wren Division but his view was masked, and the only thing clearly in sight was Spanswick's long nose which had proved to be one of those which in cold weather secretes a perpetual drop. He determined to seek Ann out after Divisions and as at last the command came 'Parade dis—miss' his heart began to be agitated. He caught her at the camp gates, no doubt on her way to the Wrennery, which was a quarter of a mile away. It occurred to him momentarily that since she had nearly got out of camp it was scarcely worth making the effort to speak to her—as though it were he who was conferring some benefit on her. He detached her from Third Officer Pilkington and the bow-legged Wren officer—whom he knew, in fact, as well if not better than her—with shameless clumsiness.

He said: 'We were interrupted before Divisions. I was going to ask you if you loathed Sunday suppers here as much as I do, and if you'd like to see what we could find in Northampton this evening.' In the middle of this remark he conceived it to be of quite unmanageable length and complexity, and made one or two pauses and urns of Jamesian amplitude. But she replied not only as though his behaviour were quite normal but with composed acquiescence, and he

felt once again what was almost familiar—the excited sense of finding himself in the end of the same species as the opposite sex, as the awed mortal discovers that the goddess has assumed, for the time being at any rate, parts conveniently corresponding to his desire.

He telephoned to book the car to take them into the town and to pick them up from the Majestic at ten—closing time seeming a brilliant inspiration to end what otherwise might have been awkwardly indeterminate. Though he had heard of the car—and, indeed, had on one occasion seen it, a battered black Daimler, disgorging the training commander at the gates—it came to him that perhaps he would never have thought to order it except for Jack Burton, whose extravagances he had once, with his grandmother's precepts fresh in mind, silently condemned but which he saw now had given him (even more than his year in London before he was called up) a good deal of whatever power he possessed to control material life. From the same source had come habits like standing up on a woman's entry or bathing daily—arts which his own tribe had despised and lost.

The driver of the car (also the proprietor) by arriving late in a checked cap and engaging them as they got in with his complaints about the meagreness of his petrol allowance and the Daimler's dyspomaniac consumption of it—holding the rear door open to the biting wind as he developed his theme—removed from the occasion any initial sense of its being a luxurious or romantic one: indeed, what Alan had looked forward to as they had stood frozen to the bone and constrained by the sentry's presence proved merely to be a prolongation of similarly repressive conditions. At last the driver shut the door and himself got into the car. Alan was relieved to find him separated from his passengers by a glass partition divided down the middle by a member to which was affixed a tarnished receptacle for flowers. The car drove off into the utterly black night and immediately but without premeditation Alan turned to his companion, put his arms round her and found in the darkness her mouth, which in the chill of her face seemed like some soft, warm-blooded animal (all aperture, like a sea-

anemone) in an unfriendly habitat. The peak of his cap knocked a little against the forward horn of her tricorne and he thought even in this moment of relief, astonished possession and sharp pleasure that this was an added challenge to his skill which had already mastered the trick of avoiding the encounter of noses.

From that moment he never doubted that they were in love. Every discovery he made about her seemed to her credit: for example, that her small hands, with their tapering fingers, turned almost purple in the cold was a positive advantage over other hands, a trait endearing enough to bring a fond smile to his lips. During the weekly period when they gathered round the aircraft tethered on the perimeter of the parade ground and in groups inspected the actual installation of the equipment whose insides they were studying, his hands made tiny involuntary gestures, like one urging on a football team, as she climbed into the machines, with the purpose of directing her movements so as to ensure that she would show the least amount of black-stockinged leg to his fellow-classmates, whom he imagined, perhaps not entirely without justification, to have arranged themselves to see as much of her as could be seen. It ceased to seem strange to him that the most desirable girl on the station should fasten her affections on him: indeed, she had soon confessed to him that previously she had been in awe of him—because, she said, he looked so ‘severe’—and he almost immediately took it for granted that her mind (which he had imagined if not precisely abstruse, at least of a subtlety beyond his own in the matters of ordinary life) could work in a flatteringly humble way. Thus when he disclosed his despair about the bombing of Germany then being undertaken by the Allies, at first she could not understand that a point of view existed that saw in the business a will of the same order of ruthlessness and cruelty that had started the war the raids were supposed to be bringing to an end. Her closed destiny of boarding school and the WRNS seemed to have left no aperture for any but orthodox views.

In a few weeks he found himself facing the ardours of the course as familiarly and easily as wearing his uniform. One

day, coming out of the hut where his cabin was, he bumped into a man with a face from the past. He stopped, and said: 'Snowy. What the hell are you doing here?'

It was Harry White, in petty officer's rig, with a campaign ribbon up. As they exchanged histories, Alan felt uncomfortably conscious of his own uniform and laughed and swore more than necessary so as to try to emphasize that his commission made no difference to their friendship. But it was impossible to imagine that they had once been at opposite ends of the celebrated ladder that Leading Air Fitter Facer had wanted moved. Alan saw with pity and curiosity that Harry had lost half his left index finger. This more than anything, by emphasizing the strange experiences unshared by Alan that Harry had undergone, brought home to the former the rapid and revolutionary passage of time. Alan began to wonder how he could get away without the burden being laid on Harry of deciding whether to salute or not to salute.

'And Lindsay went to *Indom*.'

'I don't think I remember Lindsay,' said Alan.

'Wee Lindsay. Used to pal on with Duncan Cummings.'

'After my time.'

They seemed to have caught up on the backlog of their lives, though Alan had an impulse to say that at the moment he was taking out a beautiful Wren officer, for this was not only what his mind was full of but precisely the incredible kind of thing that he would have boasted about when he and Harry were on more familiar terms and more humble levels of the service hierarchy. There was a brief, rather uneasy silence. Then with a few more words they parted. Alan was interested to observe that no question arose of Harry saluting, and realized that his former messmate was of tougher material than he had once imagined. He made his way to the block where his class was to have practical instruction that afternoon, and sought Ann out.

'What about a drink at the *Waggon* before dinner?'

A frown appeared on her smooth brow. 'Afraid I can't.'

'Are you on duty?'

'No,' she said. 'No. I'm going out with Ted.'

'Oh, I see.' This phrase, which, simple though it was, he

had picked up from an officer encountered in the wardroom at Portsmouth who had impressed him with his mastery of the appropriate response, and his bringing it out now was a triumph of readiness and calm.

'Tomorrow, perhaps, unless *you* are on duty,' she suggested.

'Will you enjoy it?'

'What?'

'Going out with Ted Spanswick.'

But the opening phase of the instructional period had become too advanced for them to be left to their own affairs and she was unable to reply other than look at him ambiguously but piercingly with her light eyes. Later he marvelled at the ironic calm of his 'Will you enjoy it?' He ate tea with the disinterest of an invalid. Spanswick came in in a blazer, having (Alan heard him say) squeezed in a game of squash. To Alan it was as though George VI or General de Gaulle had sat down to tea in the room, for Spanswick's destiny of being that night with Ann Best had given him in Alan's eyes a remote and legendary character. After tea Alan changed into civilian clothes, like a thief putting on his mask and rubber shoes, and when it was completely dark went through the station gate and along to the Wrens' quarters, which was a large isolated house in white stucco lying not far back from the road. He stood under the hedge just past the drive and lit a cigarette, but he could not wait there, for groups of naval ratings quite frequently came along the road on their way to the *Waggon* public house. He crossed the road and walked past the Wrennery on that side. His actions took him back to the days of his adolescence when no journey was too long or ludicrous, no wait too tedious, if at the end of it there might be an encounter with a girl. He went through a gate into a field to pass a little more time unobserved. Even the few steps he took involved him in extricating himself from a bog-like terrain, and he was suddenly alarmed by loud sounds of a pneumatic and crunching character which he later found to come from a horse. Not until all actions of this kind seemed exhausted did he convince himself that he had as much chance of intercepting Ann at the station gate or the wardroom as here. He

returned to camp and after some prolonged time of standing at the parade ground's edge, momentarily visiting his cabin, speaking to one or two officers as though he had a train to catch, he quite unbelievably encountered her in the purlieu of the anteroom. He greeted her jovially and as if by chance. Her response was so normal that he could believe that he had somehow misheard her account of her plans for the evening. He said, referring to the current showing at the camp cinema: 'I was toying with the idea of going to see *In Which We Serve*.'

Her manner indicated that she regarded this as a not outrageous notion. He added warmly: 'Why don't you come?'

She looked worried. 'I can't.'

'Why not?' he asked, through clenched teeth. 'Why not?'

'You know I'm seeing Ted.'

'What to do?'

'I can't see why I should tell you.'

'What?' he repeated.

Though he could understand that she might well think the question one to be left unanswered, he was hardly prepared for her starting to walk away without a word or a parting gesture. He stepped after her and took her arm. She looked at it in his hand as though it were some joint he had stolen from a butcher's, and he for his part observed how thick on her forearm were the dark blonde hairs, realizing as he gazed that her short-sleeved frock (for she, too, had assumed civilian clothes) probably denoted her intention of dancing with Spanswick at the Majestic—an occupation that she had disclosed, on the occasion when Alan had first taken her out, had given her pleasure in the past. At the time Alan had regarded the revelation with indulgence, being unable to conceive that after meeting him she would retain any desires that opposed his. Now he was amazed at the outrageous pain of his impotence to prevent her.

She said, like any girl in a film: 'You're hurting me.'

Since his wish was to murder her, his pressure on her arm seemed a trivial matter, but he released it. They stared at one another as if at a loss for words. The station dental officer passed them on his way into the anteroom and they tried to

unfreeze themselves from their tell-tale attitudes. This time she succeeded in leaving him and he asked himself in tortured bafflement how she could bring herself to inflict such cruelty, thinking of her as some Fascist sadist or indifferent goddess unamenable to the laws of ordinary human conduct.

The next day it was as though she had never been out with Spanswick. The latter drawled his self-satisfied observations and smoked through his amber cigarette holder with no more complacency or triumph than usual. Ann suggested that she and Alan went before luncheon to the *Waggon*. He could only be nonchalant by a strenuous effort of histrionics. Even as they walked, at the end of the morning, away from the lecture block towards the main gate he still felt that he was not stepping or swinging his arms with quite normal freedom.

'I still don't see how the altitude limit indicator works,' she said, referring to the lecture they had just both been at.

'Well,' he said, 'suppose the altitude limit switch is set at a hundred feet.'

'Yes.'

'Well, if the crate is flying at a hundred feet, the negative from the detector cancels out the positive from the switch on the grid of the indicator tube.'

'Yes, but where does the positive come from?'

'That's just a tapping from the 150-volt supply.'

'I see,' she said.

'Then if there's this cancellation, the indicator tube passes normal current and the low current relay works. So the thingummyjig in the middle moves up and the green light lights.'

'And what about if you're *below* a hundred feet?'

'The net potential's positive and so the indicator tube passes heavy current.'

'And the high current relay works,' she said.

'And the red lamp lights up.'

'Who thinks of these things?'

'Who indeed?' They were drawing close to the *Waggon* and he added quickly: 'Don't let's go in just yet.' She said nothing,

but did not demur as they walked past the little entrance porch in which there were already one or two officers crowded out of the saloon bar. He guided her off the road down a broad cinder path that reminded him of the landscape he sometimes used to find on solitary boyhood walks. Far ahead, across a large field islanded with thistles in which some cows grazed, was the long green rampart which supported a canal, with a red brick viaduct across the path.

'Did you enjoy last night?' he asked bitterly.

His tone appeared to pass her by: she began to dilate on the deficiencies of her evening—not in any thorough-going manner or connecting them with Spanswick—so that her realistic appraisal of floor and band and transport because it seemed to him patently felt began to fill him with complacent pleasure. Eventually they came to the grassy embankment of the canal. He took her arm and helped her up to the top of it. Something flopped from the bank into the still, brimming water, and she pressed against him in alarm.

'I think it was only a water rat.'

'Only.'

'Africa made me a bit blasé about rats,' he said, as though speaking of some larger and wilder beast. 'Though a friend of mine coming back to the mess once late at night put his hand in his jacket pocket to get a cake he'd providently left there and put it on a rat.'

'Oh.'

'That was certainly a bit unnerving.' Even in this idyllic situation his mind could not keep off his obligations: he looked at his watch and said: 'I suppose we ought to be getting back if we're going to have that drink.'

When they had scrambled down the bank he drew her under the arch of the viaduct and took her into his arms, drawing her shoulders to him with a hand encumbered strangely by his carrying his kid-gloves. He kissed her with great pity and tenderness, thinking irrelevantly of her telling him that her passing School Certificate in mathematics was really the sole reason of her being in the radar branch and finding it poignant that so pretty a girl should have to learn mathematics at all.

'I love you,' he said at last.

'I do.'

He pressed her against him remembering how years ago he had embarrassedly held away from Madge Farebrother. He said: 'I can't understand why.'

She laughed against his cheek.

'Think of all the people you *could* have. In our class, to begin with.' He added: 'Ted Spanswick, for instance.'

'Please. I don't think anything about Ted. I mean he's all right . . .'

'I was only joking.'

'I fell for you right away.'

'Me?'

'When the class started.'

'I can't believe it.'

'You were so mysterious. And handsome.'

'No,' he said. 'It's you—you who are beautiful.'

'I'm not at all. I've got crooked teeth and hairy arms.'

As they hurried back along the cinder path he wondered why he was not completely happy and remembered this glib and surely practised denial of his admiration.

He received an unexpected letter from his Uncle George saying that his grandmother was not well, news that it was difficult to take seriously since he heard from his grandmother every week. He explained in his reply that because no leave was granted during the course he would not be able to see Mrs Wrigley until the beginning of July when they had end of course leave, much as he would like to be able to go home sooner. He wrote somewhat guiltily, knowing that he should have gone for the mid-course long week-end which instead he spent with Ann at her parents'.

It was at this comfortable suburban house, hearing the news of the Normandy landings, that he realized for the first time that after all there was to be no revolution. When the war ended English life would go on as it had gone on before. He thought of his year or so in London before he was called up, and knew that his one-room flat in the Gray's Inn Road, his

rather precarious job on the *Express*, his acquaintances from the Soho cafés, had only been supportable in the provisional post-Munich air. His previous life in Mrs Wolstencroft's house seemed more real. He could not imagine what he would do, where he would live, how he would think, after the war.

As the course approached its climax the officers began to speculate on their fate at the end of it. It was rumoured that one could actually express a choice for one's post-course appointment. When Alan told Ann of this she nodded gravely. 'It's quite true.' She spoke out of a transcendental knowledge acquired when she was a rating instructor in the place. Then her expression became even more serious. 'I think Tuddy wants me to stay on here.' This was Tuddenham, the training commander.

'Why didn't you tell me before?' He was staggered that she should have a secret from him.

'I wasn't sure,' she said, looking into his eyes with her limpid blue ones.

'And why the hell is Tuddy interesting himself in the question?'

'Oh, I know Tuddy of old.'

'That may bloody well be.'

At his tone she turned aside, as though to make her way to the WRNS quarters instead of to the bus for the town for which they had been bound.

'Ann,' he called, making after her. He was awed that she could contemplate, apparently without the least qualm, the loss of an evening's happiness.

After a few strides, she relented. 'You spoil things,' she said, sadly.

'I'm sorry. I'm terribly sorry.'

In the bus, she said: 'You must get appointed here, too, Alan.'

'Me? Tuddy won't want me.'

'Of course he will if you put *Resistance* down as your first choice and do a bit of lobbying.'

'I'd be hopeless.'

'Look how good you were the other week on the radio altimeter—the altitude limit switch business.'

'But the schoolies do all the lecturing.'

She paused pregnantly. 'They're going to set up a travelling repair unit, based on *Resistance*. The officer in charge will always be here. It will be just as good as being appointed to the staff.'

He laughed. 'Can you imagine me in charge of a repair unit? I'm hopeless at fault-finding. I couldn't find a faulty valve on a one-valve radio.'

'You must have been all right at something or you wouldn't have got a commission,' she said, with irritation. 'You're too modest. Seriously, you are.'

'I'm not. I just know.' He could not help wondering if she had merely been trying to be kind to him the day she had asked him questions about the altitude limit switch and if she had known the answers all the time.

They got off the bus at a stop before the centre of the town to visit an hotel they had found on a previous occasion when searching for spirits in the prevailing shortage and whose amateur and eccentric air had taken their fancy. They had a drink in the wicker-furnished lounge and then went through to the linoleumed dining-room to eat a meal whose character seemed determined by a continual though sparse arrival of a miscellany of eatables to the kitchen, so that disappointed by the sudden 'going off' of the soup they were cheered by the offer of a fried egg with their sausages, though previously they had been depressed by seeing all about them a main course of shepherd's pie and beans.

She said: 'It's all right for you to stay for end of course leave. I've had a letter from Mummy.'

'That's marvellous.' Though he knew the visit was impossible, he could not bear immediately to disillusion her: besides he dimly conceived that by some miracle of transport or subdivision he might spend the leave simultaneously in two places. 'But I'm afraid it's no go. I shall have to go home. I haven't been for ages. It's a terrible bind, but there it is.'

'Must you?'

'Duty calls.'

'We needn't go straight home. We could stay somewhere. We could stay here.'

He was seized by a sensation of anticipation so pleasurable that it seemed that any step towards its fulfilment could only be a superfluous anticlimax, and yet, as he had once as a young adolescent, seeing Mary rub his grandmother's rheumatically shoulders, imagined a future marital state when the nude back of a woman would perpetually be offered to him, he realized that what he was experiencing must be a feeble adumbration of reality. Nevertheless, since he was currently so happy, it seemed no real sacrifice to insist on his destiny of spending the leave with his grandmother. He felt suddenly especially solicitous for Ann's physical welfare, as though there was some problem of keeping her alive and in good health until the auspicious moment at last arrived when he could with a clear conscience stay with her in an hotel. 'Are you going to have the rhubarb and custard?'

'It won't be sweet enough.'

'No. I could ask them for sugar.'

'Hopeless.'

'I'll buy some chocolate afterwards. I've got some points left.'

'Why don't you go to your grandmother's one week-end before the end of the course? You could go after the Saturday morning period. It would be quite safe if you didn't take a case.' It was illegal to stay away from the Establishment during the course. 'Then we could have the end of course leave together.'

'Could be done.' He concealed his alarm at the prospect of committing so heinous a crime: service matters which he had come to disregard as a rating seemed after his being commissioned to have taken on renewed powers of taboo and mystique, as though he had been converted afresh to religious dogma.

'I could come with you,' she said, showing amazement at this *aperçu*. 'If you'd have me,' she added, facetiously.

His alarm vanished: afterwards, the only debit against his happiness was the old unease—at first about the suggestion of

their staying at the *New Victoria* having come from her, and then at her familiarity with the ways of successfully taking illicit week-ends.

The sun shone warmly as they walked from the tram stop. They were in uniform, their pyjamas squeezed in service respirators. Passing the gates of the little park, he observed, ashamed of the allotments the war had brought: 'It didn't look too bad when it was all grass.'

The house came into view. He almost said: 'That's rather like my grandmother sitting outside the front door.' But even as he formulated the remark he realized that he had been misled by the coincidence of this person and the family house, for she was too aged, yellow and shrunk to be given to Ann as an exemplar of his grandmother's appearance. A moment or two later he waved, even then the physical gesture preceding the recognition by his mind. And as they came up the path he wondered how he could have been so obtuse as to suppose that anyone else would have stationed herself in the uncomfortable kitchen chair to look out for him. He introduced Ann: Mary came out to remove the chair and help Mrs Wrigley back into the house: soon the former image of his grandmother, though he had possessed it for years, quite disappeared into the painful travesty before his eyes.

He was surprised and gratified at her cordiality towards Ann, for he had not previously conceived that there could be anything in common between them, even their sex. In his grandmother's not uninterested but somewhat remote and faintly amused catechism, Alan found a sense of the distant past that at last he tracked down to the days of his Uncle George's courtship. Iris's face powder and high-heeled shoes had had for Mrs Wrigley the same slightly incredible, ludicrous and immoral connotations as Ann's uniform and completely emancipated status had now—matters to which, had it not been for the younger woman's potential status in the family and fundamentally common feminine interests, Mrs Wrigley would have paid no more attention than to psychoanalysis or revolutionary politics.

It had seemed remarkable to see, when they had all entered the house, through the open kitchen door at the back of the house, the red face of Jim beaming at them, his stout figure in shirt sleeves and actually holding some implement necessary for the making of tea. In a moment or two he recalled that Uncle George had in that recent letter said that Mary and her husband had given up their house and were living with Mrs Wrigley the better to look after her. It was part of the democratizing process of the times that Jim—once a somewhat sinister protagonist at ‘the Arguers’—should now be almost a member of the family, and that Mary should refer to and, indeed, occasionally address, Mrs Wrigley with the bogus intimacy called from others by the very old or ill, as ‘grannie’. The accents of Mary and Jim, after his long absence from the town, seemed to him as strange as those of the porters on a station where the express in which one is travelling arrives for its first stop.

Ann was to sleep in the ‘spare’ bedroom. After he had shown it to her, he took her to his old room, the room which Uncle George had occupied in bygone years and which Alan was naturally to use on this occasion.

‘Good Lord,’ he said, opening idly a hexagonal box of imitation tortoise-shell on the chest-of-drawers, ‘here’s my old watch.’ He examined the mark on the glass where he had once scraped it against a wall, and the scratches along the circumference where he used to get into the case with a penknife in vain attempts at repair. ‘This takes me back.’

‘I didn’t get who that odd fat man was?’ said Ann.

‘Only Mary’s gormless husband,’ he said, divining her disapproval though not its reason, and guiltily sacrificing Jim to her good opinion. He sat on the bed and pulled her between his legs, lifting her skirt until he could press his cheek against her thighs. When she stepped away he was struck as he always was at the strange contrast between her black uniform and the pale colours of what she wore underneath.

‘We oughtn’t to stay too long up here,’ she said.

He had caught her hand and now he drew her down beside him. As he pushed her back across the bed, he heard a familiar

series of sounds, and looked up and saw the pensile light-switch on its crocheted cover bumping against the tall oak bed-head with their movements.

'Alan,' she said, 'I'm going to get absolutely covered in bits.' She wriggled off the bed and to her feet, leaving him gazing at the ceiling which had, as it had always had, a ghostly map imprinted by damp or unevennesses on the white papered surface, which itself had a scarcely-perceptible silvery pattern.

When they got downstairs they found that George had arrived. He did not seem to Alan comical or young as he once had; nor was there much between them except that Alan in tribute to the easy facetiousness of the past, behaved in a simpler way than the conversation and situation required. Alan was impressed by George's gallantry towards Ann, a hitherto unrevealed aspect of his talents.

Returning to the sitting-room, after a visit 'upstairs' (the euphemism had in fact come back to him as he left the room), looking forward with some degree of pleasure to a prolongation of the conversation—which he was enjoying really for Ann's sake, as he might have taken her to a film which he had already seen and been amused by—he encountered George in the hall, and was about to pass him with a murmured pleasantries (perhaps the 'Ow do' with which Mr Wrigley used to greet his proletarian acquaintances) when he stopped and said, with an expression which before his words reminded Alan what he had really known from the start, that nothing but intolerable sadness could be extracted from this visit: 'The doctor says he thinks Grannie has a cancer.'

'Oh.' Alan felt that he needed the powers of a great actor to make the monosyllable—or any words—adequate or convincing. Though where they were standing was quintessentially of his grandmother's house—beside the row of hooks where Mr Wrigley's 'golfing' hat had used to hang—Alan was so taken back to the atmosphere of Greenhead that almost automatically he used one of the phrases current and mysterious then: 'Has she seen a specialist?'

When they returned to the sitting-room it appeared to him that his grandmother's existence was already posthumous. All

that was happening seemed to be happening in a dream or as the result of some prognostication.

Mrs Wrigley had recently discovered some old photographs, which she was now showing to Ann. Ann passed one of them to Alan. 'Your mother and father on their honeymoon.'

His mother's hair was somewhat mountainous, suitable, as in the eighteenth-century style, for the superimposition of a galleon or birdcage: his father wore a small round cap as though, playing in a parents' match at a prep school, he had humorously swapped headgear with one of the opposing team. He thought sententiously what staggering aeons separated him from his parents, yet how few the years since their marriage. And he felt full of remorse at never, it seemed, having expressed his love for this immortally young, unimaginably suffering pair, who had not known what their destinies were to be.

George announced that he ought to be leaving because he expected Iris home about this hour, and on his way had to pick up the children from their other grandmother's.

'Where's she gone?' Mrs Wrigley inquired.

'Manchester.'

'Manchester?' Mrs Wrigley repeated, as though it had been Timbuktu.

'She wanted to try to get some material for a dress.'

'They've got a very good selection at Backhouse & Jones without traipsing to Manchester.'

Mrs Wrigley retired early. Alan and Ann went out to walk in the dusk through the park. He could not for some unapparent reason bring himself to tell her of his grandmother's complaint. Later, he was excited by the business of their sleeping in the same house, and among such myriad threats of interruption as Jim's heavy tread in the attic and Mary's visits to Mrs Wrigley's room, Alan managed to snatch some voluptuous seconds as Ann prepared for bed—when he took her a glass of water; when she yielded the bathroom to him; and finally standing quite openly at her door and talking loud generalities as she put on her pyjamas. She came to him for a moment, seeming remarkably small and slim. He whispered to her then

about his grandmother, as though perhaps the news excused the various deficiencies of the visit, not least these childish and frustrated contacts between them.

When she finally slipped away from him she jumped on the bed and squatted for a moment, her knees drawn up, her hands grasping the top of the sheet. 'If I had cancer,' she said with utter certainty, 'I'd kill myself.'

Back in his own room he smiled with pity at her innocence. How often had he thought with self-destruction in mind of the anguishes and pains of life that he felt he would be unable to bear, yet realizing always in the end that even if the means of killing himself were conveniently to hand, foolproof and painless, he would nevertheless have to undergo the worst that life could do—that that was, in fact, as much a part of existence as its long pleasurable uneventful tracts.

There was a carefree atmosphere, as at the end of a school term. Waiting for the interview, some officers had come out into the sunshine and actually sprawled on the grass at the back of the administrative block, or sat, with their feet dangling, on a nearby wall. To settle their appointments, a commander had come from the Admiralty, conducting the interviews jointly with Lieutenant-Commander Tuddenham.

'He's a harmless old boy,' said one officer, who had just come out of the interview room, very tickled with himself at being given an English air station. 'Anxious to please, really.'

When Alan came out he looked round immediately for Ann, with whom he had previously been waiting, but evidently she had been drawn away in her turn to take her place among the two or three officers marshalled by one of the instructing staff in the ante-interview room to ensure an uninterrupted procession before the Admiralty commander and Tuddy. He stood, not hearing the conversation, with a group of interviewed officers who were discussing their appointments. When Ann appeared he walked away from them without a word.

'Was it all right, darling?' he asked, alarmingly conscious of his own failure.

She ignored the question. 'Did you get it?' She meant the appointment as officer in charge of the *Resistance*-based repair unit.

'No.'

'Oh, Alan.'

'It just wasn't on, darling.'

'How could it not be on?' Her face was a rigid mask of displeasure that made him long to be able to appease her. 'The commander was absolutely OK. Absolutely OK.'

'You got the *Resistance* job all right, then?'

'Yes, yes, of course,' she said. 'Where are you going?'

'*Eagle*.'

'Oh, Alan.'

'It's all right. She's Home Fleet.'

'We'll never see each other. We may never see each other again.'

'But the Home Fleet's as safe as houses.' It seemed to him that it was only for her sake he was sorry he was going to sea and from a base far removed from her at *Resistance*, but clearly this could not really be so.

'Who got the repair unit?'

'Jock Gray.'

'Jock Gray,' she repeated scornfully.

'He's terribly good as a practical man. Far, far better than I am.'

'I don't suppose you fought for the repair job at all.'

He could not conceive how she could imagine him 'fighting' for a state of affairs which those qualified to judge—indeed, he himself—thought undesirable. 'After all,' he said, 'it will be a much more effective unit under Jock than it would have been under me.'

'What does that matter?'

'Well, it does.'

'It's our happiness that matters. You not being 'killed, our being near each other.'

'But, darling, it's only sensible that they should want a good mechanic for the unit. I mean they're not setting it up for amusement. It's got to repair things . . .'

However, before he could finish this speech she was walking away. He dare not, because of the others, follow her or call after her, and felt a great despair at ever being able to make contact with her again, so utterly opposed to him had she been in this first serious affair of their lives, so full of contempt and hatred her look at the last. He failed to understand why she didn't accept that reason must be paramount.

V

The *New Watchman* offices were in a narrow alley behind Reuters. The literary editor, a stout man with a beard and very red cheeks, called Jack Pearson, was about to take Alan into Fleet Street for a drink. The door of the room they were in was opened by the paper's editor, wearing an unusually amiable expression. He said to his companion (who did not himself enter the room but merely from the corridor inclined his head benevolently in its general direction): 'Here's where the paper gets written.'

'Not quite all of it,' said Pearson promptly and laughing obsequiously. 'Not quite all of it.'

'Good,' said the visitor in a rich voice. 'Excellent.'

There were one or two more equally generalized exchanges and then the editor went out, slamming the door behind him.

'Trust Billy not to introduce us,' said Pearson.

For Alan the incident had a disturbing quality, as though there had suddenly been imported into the orderly time sequence of waking life the cramped or eternal distortions of a dream. 'Who was that?' he asked.

'Charles Debates,' said Pearson. 'MP for Beesdon.'

'I thought so. He's my cousin.'

'Is he, now? I noticed he was specially intimate with you.'

'Ha, ha. Very funny. No, he doesn't know me from Adam. I haven't seen him since long before the war, since he was a schoolboy.'

'He's Left. Someone said Billy was taking him up. Or he's taking Billy up. Can't remember.'

'Charlie Debates,' said Alan reminiscently. Poor Lottie's death had occurred in 1910 memorably because a concomitant of the Munich crisis—he remembered reading his grandmother's letter about the even as he went to some hall off Holborn to draw a respirator. Charlie was already doing well in a solicitor's office—perhaps had even then been given his articles and become a solicitor—in the sea-side town where his mother held a post as housekeeper. Since then Alan's news of Charlie had been even more sporadic. At the time of his grandmother's funeral (which Charlie had not attended) his Uncle George had told him that Charlie—who soon after the war broke out had become employed as a solicitor by a munitions manufacturing company and had never been called up—was the youngest councillor in his town and was also 'nursing' the constituency of Beesdon. Alan recalled his astonishment at that time not only at the preposterous notion that Charlie might become a Member of Parliament but also that he should do so in the Labour interest—for if one who stole from his mother and soiled lavatory seats was to be among the country's legislators it seemed to Alan more plausible that his political complexion should be Tory rather than Socialist. However, in the winter of 1910 it appeared extremely unlikely that any anomaly of this kind would have to be faced since the sitting member for Beesdon was a Conservative with a majority at the 1910 election of over nine thousand votes.

Among the Labour triumphs of 1915 Beesdon was not more remarkable than many another, and Charles Debates's photograph appeared in *The Times* merely as one of a veritable pantheon of new members. Alan had gazed at the small image, trying in vain to see in it the boy he had known. A stern face gazed out—already, in its early thirties, with more than a hint of baldness in the flatness of the hair, of dewlaps in the weight of the jaw. The chin was perhaps not very prominent, but the fleshy nose and aggressive mouth negated any suspicion of weakness.

The glimpse of Debates in the corridor of the *Watchman* confirmed Alan's impression of formidableness. The stature was tall, the figure rather heavy, the clothes aldermanic.

'The next thing you know, boy,' said Pearson, 'you'll be getting an article from him to rewrite.'

They went down the stairs and into the street. Alan said: 'I've only time for one. We're having people to dine.'

It was not until their guests had gone home, late that night, that he remembered Charlie Debates. He came up to the sitting-room of the flat after seeing them down the two rather tortuous flights of stairs, and found Ann still standing pensive, among the concave cushions, glasses, grey ashtrays. He unzipped her dress, which opened at her side like a wound, and put his hand into the small of her back. He felt from her an unindicated but unmistakable absence of interest, and withdrew the hand and closed the zip, completing the operation with an ostensibly humorous pat.

'Are we going to leave everything for Mrs Hunter?' This was the daily woman.

'Oh, yes.'

But still she didn't seem inclined to move off to bed. He sprawled in a chair, and said: 'Well, it all went off very well. Excellent apple pie, excellent.'

She responded to this no more than to his embrace. After a while she said: 'Gerald wasn't ready for going home at all.'

'Wasn't he?'

'You forced his hand.'

'Well, Pat seemed—'

'It was only because you were talking about last tubes and things.'

'Oh, good Lord. I didn't mean that to apply to her. I was just making general conversation.'

'You don't think before you speak.'

He was about to deny this accusation, as automatically as any statement of the opposition in a dispute, but, thinking of the proposition, said merely: 'Don't I?' He contemplated the fact that some people actually did habitually consider their tongue, that probably Ann did.

'What possessed you to tell Jean you never ate sweets?'

'But I explained that—it was only a pious resolve on my part after reading that report about dental caries. I wasn't really being serious.'

'You still don't get the point. It wasn't more than a month ago that Jean and Bob took the trouble to bring us chocolate back from Switzerland.'

'Ah, chocolate,' he said, as though the distinction removed any chance of his having committed a gaffe. A moment later, realizing the enormity of offence, if offence it was, he added: 'I don't suppose Jean connected the two things.'

'Of course she would. Only someone as unsubtle as you could possibly have avoided it.'

'Oh dear. I'm sorry if I put my foot in it.'

'Alan darling, it's not a bit of good apologizing to *me*.'

In the bedroom she suddenly broke irrelevantly into some remarks of his by returning to the subject of their evening. 'The trouble is you just let things happen.'

'What do you mean?'

'You don't contribute to the conversation.'

'How can that be?'

'Oh, you speak, of course. But you never start anything. You just expect people to be interested and amused automatically.'

'But think of all that stuff about Greece.'

'Naturally it's not impossible from a whole evening for you to pick a subject that was your particular cup of tea and which you perhaps started off.'

He thought about these deficiencies of his as he cleaned his teeth. His instinct was to believe them invented or exaggerated, but ratiocination compelled him to concede that his was a difficult and in many ways unsatisfactory character. What no one, perhaps Ann least of all, realized was the enormous progress he had made simply to be as he was—to be here in Chelsea, on the *Watchman* staff, and so forth—and not a provincial Uncle George or, worse, an orphaned and maladjusted Uncle George.

When he returned from the bathroom she was in bed. The

sight of her, small in her pyjamas, on the almost Oriental lowness of the divan, brought its usual pang of tenderness, but her intensely critical regard still surrounded her with an integument he saw no prospect of invading. He tried to think of a remark that would please her, but everything that filled his mind was of that evening—which he had imagined had been so successful but instead was a mere compendium of his deficiencies.

‘I’ve mentioned my cousin, Charlie Debates, haven’t I?’

She managed faintly to utter the negative.

‘Never told you about poor Lottie?’ He battled against her unspoken resistance, laying in the preliminaries to his narration of the afternoon’s encounter. But after revealing Charlie’s Parliamentary status he felt his task lighter.

She turned on her elbow and said: ‘How typical of you that you should have a cousin in Parliament and never tell anyone about it.’

‘I made sure you knew. Anyway, I can’t really be said to know him now.’

‘Why didn’t you tell him this afternoon who you were?’

‘Inauspicious occasion. And who am I?’

‘Don’t be silly, Alan.’

Though his mentioning of Charlie had seemed to him instinctive, he realized that he must have known unconsciously that the subject would engage her interest. For he was coming to see in her much that was regrettably missing in himself and which, in the early days of their marriage when he imagined her to be precisely like himself, he had never conceived she could own. In the debate they had before his release from the Navy as to whether he should return to the *Express* or seek a job more in keeping with his ideals he had been touched to find her siding with him, but he saw now that her willingness then to sacrifice a reasonably safe and lucrative job did not mean that she despised either established position or money. No doubt while he had seen a worthwhile occupation she had foreseen better scope for his abilities. He was admiringly surprised to discover that she possessed ambition: moreover, since it was ambition for him (her own job was merely a sort of

assistant assistant secretary to the board of a large building society) the quality seemed to lack any of the mercenariness or ruthlessness which sometimes made it less than desirable. However, of late he had come to see how hard she could drive him in this realm where she could operate only vicariously.

Money, too. At first she had taken no more interest in the capital he had inherited from his father than in the sums he disbursed taking her out to dine or to the theatre. Then, learning of fortunes being made by trading in the only sort of goods available to enterprising merchants in the immediate post-war world, surplus service material or spoilt foodstuffs, she speculated not entirely frivolously on what shortage or control they might exploit by putting out their money more dashinglly. Later, as she heard from the gossip in her board-room about inflation and equities her wish to lay out their money well became more orthodox. He was injudicious enough to say to her that his grandfather had 'burnt his fingers' by investing some of this very money in a speculative concern.

She was immediately interested. 'What mill? Do you mean he bought its shares?'

He explained.

'You never told me you had them.'

'I haven't. I sold them before the war.'

'How much for?'

'Oh, I forget. The bank manager said it wasn't a bad time to sell.'

'And how much are they now?'

'Goodness knows.'

'Do you mean you've never looked to see how they've gone on?'

'Not much point after I'd sold them.'

A few days later she said: 'Did you get more than four shillings each for those shares in the Sudan Spinning Company Limited?'

'Why?'

'Because they're worth four and threepence now.'

He was moved by the evidence of her concern and of her

excursion into such recondite and unfeminine matters, the more so when he discovered that the shares were quoted only on the Manchester Stock Exchange.

She went on: 'I wish I knew what your grandfather paid.'

'It wouldn't do you the slightest good.'

'Couldn't you have got the loss back out of your grandfather's estate?'

'How could I? My grandmother had to mortgage the house in the end to get enough money to live on.'

'He should have invested the money in something safe.'

'But you're saying we ought to speculate.'

'He was a trustee. That's quite different.'

Her expertise in this matter was gained, of course, from cross-examination of her colleagues at work. Her position there became, he realized, more assured, more important, as the gifts were discovered that had made her a Wren officer, though that did not prevent her from musing about more responsible and lucrative posts for him.

Charles Debates's venture into left-wing journalism, if such his interest in the *Watchman* had portended, could not in any event have materialized, for not long after his appearance with Billy Colquhoun there was a minor Government reshuffle in which he was made Parliamentary Secretary to one of the Ministers. Alan took care not to let Ann stay ignorant of this surprising fact.

That it had made its impression on her was shown by a conversation a few weeks later. She said: 'We ought to have a party.'

'Yes,' he said, sitting on the side of the bed where she lingered after her Sunday breakfast, and kissing her.

'Pay attention.'

'I am doing,' he said. 'We owe drinks to a lot of people.'

'Do you think you could get your cousin?'

'My cousin?'

he repeated, baffled by the reference, and thinking for some reason that the word connoted the feminine gender.

'Yes.'

'Oh, you mean Charlie Debates. But I told you, I don't know him.'

She slipped her hand into his pyjamas and caressed him. 'One must know one's cousin.'

'This is not any old cousin. But I suppose I could write to him.'

'I wish you would, Alan,' she said, looking at him seriously in the eyes.

He wrote the next day: not an invitation to the party (which indeed, was still nebulous) but a letter from the paper, disclosing his relationship, reminding Debates of his visit to the office, and asking for an interview to talk about the party's fostering of new methods in the building industry—*à propos* of a somewhat imaginary forthcoming *Watchman* supplement on Labour and automation and nationalization. A reply came back by return of post, in brief but cordial terms, proposing a day and hour at the Ministry.

It struck Alan when the time arrived and, emerging from the Underground at Westminster, he set off up Whitehall, that the precise location of the various Ministries was as simultaneously open and recherché as that of the clubs in Pall Mall. Where, for example, the Reform or the Ministry of Health lay was no secret but neither was particularly easy to find.

Alan at last discovered his destination. Within the tall doors, at the top of an imposing flight of steps, was a table and a chair outside the open door of a small room. On the table was a dog-eared foolscap notebook and a supply of forms. A messenger sat at the table and Alan reasonably imagined that this individual had observed his approach and was ready to receive him. However, just as he reached the table, the messenger rose and hobbled into the adjoining room whence his voice could be heard saying that his tea could be poured out last and giving certain other domestic directions of a more obscure kind. Another messenger emerged from the room but instead of taking the first messenger's place at the desk, as Alan conceived he might, went to the top of the flight of stairs and gazed impassively but intently in the direction of a rather soiled white statue which stood in an embrasure just inside the

entrance doors. After an interval a third messenger came down the stairs which led to the first floor and seemed for a few moments to be about to speak to the statue-watching messenger, perhaps to draw him from his reverie to a more active role in the Ministry, but eventually passed without a word through the door which had engulfed the first messenger of all. The messengers wore navy blue uniforms of an antique, loose cut and felt-like material reminiscent of the uniform issued to Alan when, during the war, he went from the seaman's branch to the world of radar. Indeed, it occurred to him that the messengers had all seen service in the forces of the Crown, for their tottering gait could not be entirely attributed to advancing years but must in fact have arisen from old wounds or long years in damp barracks. Their faces, also, were too uniformly grotesque to have come together by chance. Like a page of sketches of heads by an old master, the tradition was firmly realistic but the creator had idly allowed a fantastic imagination to operate, so that these pitted and shakily-outlined noses or collapsed mouths or drooping eyelids or wen-peaked pates were credible only by taking virtuosity into account and the knowledge that verisimilitude must in fact have been the determining factor in their production.

The first messenger now reappeared and, seating himself at the desk, inquired as to Alan's business. He took a pencil in a hand that was like an illustration to a textbook on arthritis or gout, and slowly filled in one of his supply of forms. When the foolscap notebook was pulled forward to have some information as to Alan's visit inscribed in it, an entry for the football pools was revealed beneath. Alan thought how extraordinary it was that these messengers (the very institution of civil service messengers, no doubt) had remained utterly untouched by the revolution of 1915—still retaining not only the manners and pace of the old epoch, but also its ethics and desires; aged retainers, corrupted by their masters' world, who would never accept their liberation.

The third messenger shuffled out of the nearby room and was addressed by the messenger who had completed the form with a view to his conducting Alan to the Parliamentary

Secretary, but according to the newcomer this could not be, for, contrary to appearances, he declared himself to be engaged on an incompleted errand whose nature, however, he did not specify, but adding, whether or not with any relevance Alan did not know: 'Are you having a barf bun today?'

A messenger free from other chores at length appeared and led Alan up several flights of stairs. 'We haven't to use the lifts except to go to the top floor,' he said, holding Alan's form in a rudimentary hand. 'Fuel saving.' This messenger, completely hairless, had a deep dimple in his temple where a bullet had, perhaps not surprisingly, failed to penetrate the skull. They trudged along the stone-floored corridors past a great number of doors bearing cards with various names until Alan was delivered into the care of a brisk woman in her thirties who put him into a book-lined room labelled 'Library'. He was brought out by a lean man of a similar age, who led the way through what was evidently his own room into the presence of Charles Debates. The Parliamentary Secretary sat at a desk by an almost ostentatiously empty grate: above an undistinguished marble mantelpiece (on which reposed a cup and saucer and a copy of *The Times*) was hung a rich tapestry which Alan at first took with surprise to be an elaborate caricature concerning the Government, for the central figure in the animated throne-room scene depicted was a small, bald, black-moustached, hunched, inscrutable figure. After a moment's reflection, however, Alan realized that this was not Mr Attlee but truly a ruler of Indian or perhaps Persian sway.

Debates had been reading a paper on his desk, but as Alan and the Private Secretary advanced towards him he looked up and took off the heavy horn-rimmed spectacles he was wearing as dramatically as a self-unmasking in the last act of a Shakespearian morality or a nurse removing a large piece of adhesive tape from a hairy epidermis. 'Hello, Alan! What a ridiculously long time it's been,' he said, as though his four or five years of seniority gave him an unquestioned right still to hint by his voice that his own concerns were of far greater seriousness than Alan could be bringing with him. He dismissed the Private

Secretary and gave Alan a chair. In his letter, Alan, after rejecting such forms as 'Debates' or 'Mr Secretary', had called his cousin 'Charles' which presently he continued to do, the abandonment of the diminutive not seeming at all incongruous now that the memory of the boy was obliterated by the substantial and idiosyncratic presence of the man. They talked about their careers.

'We've both done extraordinarily well,' said Debates.

'Well, you have.'

'So have you, Alan, so have you. You got away from Garside, that was the main thing. What a hole that was! What was the name of that terrible cinema we used to go to? Some of the seats were torn and the springs used to nip your bottom.'

'Do you mean the Grosvenor?' It was quite shocking and pathetic to hear of the true nature of the establishment that had given him so much pleasure.

'Yes, you were wise to leave Garside. Now you're a man of influence.'

'Oh, I'm not.'

'I don't mind telling you that in the past I've had a good deal of sympathy with the *Watchman* point of view. But you know that, of course, once one's on the inside one sees that things aren't as simple as you chaps make out. Take this business that Stafford was talking about at Derby.'

In some ways Charles Debates was infinitely more impressive than Alan could have imagined. The dark brown suit was an excellent fit: the jaw had a dull bloom: the voice had not lost its northern tones but far from being a drawback they gave weight and flavour to every syllable uttered. Debates certainly had a substantial presence—and he sat in his ministerial chair as though he had been born to it. On the other hand Alan had to marvel that such a commonplace mind had got where it was, though pondering the matter later he realized that received views about politics were only received because men of influence held them and that, after all, it was not unnatural for the instruments of government to believe completely in governmental policy. And surely Debates's sympathy with the Left (or, at any rate, his wish to be agreeable

towards it) betokened a higher political intelligence than he cared to reveal at the present juncture.

Alan introduced the subject that was the ostensible purpose of his visit but his conscientiousness appeared lost on Debates, quite content to continue his virtual monologue on topics of his own choosing. The surprisingly near sound of Big Ben striking the hour came through the window, and almost simultaneously the Private Secretary appeared, no doubt to remind his master of his next appointment. Debates stood up and Alan followed suit. He was introduced to the Private Secretary, Anthony Perry.

Debates said: 'We've been reminiscing disgracefully. Poor Percival hasn't got what he came for, I'm sure. Alan, do you remember when you were caught eating a slab of uncooked puff pastry?'

'No, I don't think I do.'

This murmured denial was quite lost, for Debates turned to the Private Secretary and added: 'Believe me, Tony, this man received the most terrific flogging I've ever seen.'

Alan was let out of the room by Perry through a different door from the one by which he had entered, and he noted the simple ingenuity of the device, typically British, to keep the minister's visitors from encountering each other. Down the corridors he thought with amazement about the puff pastry incident. How could Charlie not remember that it was he himself who had eaten the disgusting stuff? Surely he could not, after the immense passage of years, feel any lingering sense of disgrace. It came to Alan that here was simply an example of the creation of myth—when subconscious guilt puts on another's shoulders the burden of having killed the father or raped the queen. But how account for the business of the flogging? For, of course, no one had laid a finger on Charlie. His mother had laughed somewhat feebly and remarked on her son's love of pastry as though that excused him for eating it raw. His grandmother had never inflicted corporal punishment in her whole existence. His grandfather's interest in others scarcely extended to the violent influencing of their lives.

‘Have you got your pass, sir?’

The tones, produced as by some contraption of the Frankenstein period for a robot’s voice-box, an affair of leaking bellows and rattling ivory, came to Alan in his reverie without disclosing any credible meaning. ‘My what?’

He had arrived at and was making to walk through the entrance hall and the voice was that of the custodian of the desk who, with greater animation than he had so far betrayed, had half risen to his feet, holding up a stiff but crooked finger and adding, in the injured manner of one whose sense of fair play has been outraged: ‘You must surrender your pass here, sir, before you can leave the building. It says so on it, sir.’

Realizing now the full significance of the slip of paper handed to him by Anthony Perry, he felt for it, and at length brought it from a trousers pocket. The messenger took it from him, looked at it sadly, and smoothed it out as though it were a banknote. ‘We has to keep all these-’ere,’ he said.

He could not help going down to the front door once or twice, some time before the first guest could reasonably be expected, on the pretext he made to himself of seeing that no milk bottles or dog turds lay at the entrance to the minute garden—the gate, and the railings on the dwarf wall, had doubtless been of iron and disappeared during the war. A calm, cool, cloudless late April evening confronted him. In the street were a few delapidated cars dating from the epoch when the railings had been extant and round them played some unspeakable urchins, who, observing Alan, addressed their hoarse cries and wholly formalistic imitations of dive-bombers and machine-guns partly to him, as though expecting his admiration for their cacophany or intimidating his latent hostility. The seedy newsagents and junkshops of the worst end of the Fulham Road could be seen at the end of the street.

He turned back into the house, seeing with the eyes of a visitor the paintless stucco of the house’s façade and the pot animal in one of the windows of the lower maisonette which with the true generosity of art lovers the owners were content ever to contemplate merely from the rear. He had always

been rather taken, not to say proud, of 'the flat', which he had boldly rented not very long after his appointment to *Eagle* had fallen through and he had come to the Admiralty instead, in the days when V-weapons were bombarding London and such places were just about to be had. The fact, too, that he automatically became a protected tenant under the Rent Acts, with the consequent virtual freezing of his rent, added, in his eyes, to the comeliness of the flat, as, over the years since the war, unfurnished accommodation had become no more plentiful and furnished rents rose to staggering heights. But it came to him now that perhaps it was a bit much to ask some people to this flat, in this street. No doubt Charlie Debates, for instance, would arrive in a Government limousine, which would have to draw up among the potential raspberry-blowing, cellulose-scratching urchins of the gutter. Climbing the stairs, he thought that at least their drawing-room was in its proper place on the first floor.

His forebodings seemed to have been justified half an hour after the party's starting time. He was talking with an increasing sense of anticlimax to Jack Pearson's wife, a woman who no doubt because of her husband's occupation spoke of nothing but literary matters and to increase her height to almost insane lengths wore a hat which because of its close resemblance to a chimney-pot seemed to be made of the wrong material, like the surrealist fur cup and saucer. He broke awkwardly away with the jug of martinis as Ann passed him and said to her, between his teeth, as they walked the few steps to another group: 'Nobody's turning up. We should have asked more people.'

In a new dress (which he now uneasily noticed showed the beginnings of her bosom) and some modification of her hair style she looked to him mysterious and she gave a silent smile, quite unlike the response she might usually make, as though conscious of being enigmatic. A slim dark man appearing that moment through the door, she took Alan's hand and said: 'Come and meet Bill Gagg.'

She left them alone almost immediately. Alan realized in only a vague way who Gagg was and embarked on a neutral

conversation. 'You came by car then. Up from the Embankment? You'd have trouble with that diversion.' It was an indication of how rapidly he had 'placed' Gagg that he automatically assumed that petrol rationing would not apply to him.

Gagg, balding though young, smiled a great deal (showing one incisor completely covered with gold) but did not commit himself to any but the least significant admissions and opinions. He said cautiously that his route had not been quite straightforward.

'You've been doing business with Ann's building society, I hear,' Alan said, looking round the room surreptitiously to find someone to take Gagg off his hands.

'No. We tried to but no dice. One of the companies in the Group wanted some orthodox finance.' Gagg on this topic became plainly more forthcoming and coherent. 'It wasn't quite orthodox enough for Mrs Percival's outfit. I mean the security. Don't mistake me—it was perfectly good. Just not up their street. So we tipped our hats to each other and parted good friends.'

'I sec.'

'As a matter of fact we were fixed up the next week by another building society. That's the funny thing—same marble halls, same cheese-paring directors, same millions in the bank, but one society does and one doesn't. Like women.'

'Yes. Yes.' Alan gave a great grin of amiable amusement. 'Do you know Ann's sister? Come over and be introduced.' Jill Best had been asked so as to mop up such surplus men.

Alan had another word with Ann after relieving himself of Gagg. 'Isn't this chap whatsaname coming—Gagg's boss?'

'Mr Wooles,' said Ann.

'Yes.'

'We have to hope.'

'Have we?' He had kept his own glass topped up and was already inhibited enough to be flippant.

Some special tread or disturbance of air or perhaps even the noise from below of the limousine drew Alan's gaze to the door seconds before Charles Debates entered. The Minister stopped just inside the room and took out a handkerchief. By

the time Alan reached him he was blowing his nose, the handkerchief spread across both palms, which were held almost as though to pray. Though certainly conscious of Alan's propinquity, before acknowledging it he gave a searching look at the contents of the handkerchief and then rubbed the palms of his hands together.

'How good of you to come, Charles.' The name—which still savoured to him of compromise—seemed as novel as the appearance, though both, Alan told himself, undoubtedly belonged to his cousin.

'Ah. Ah,' said Debates, and then, with his lips inwardly compressed, sniffed to rid himself of the last suspicion of nasal obstruction.

'Your wife couldn't manage it, then?'

'No, no. She's at the coast.' There was a sense behind Debates's reply (as behind many of his responses) of a certain outrageousness in Alan's question, though when Alan had telephoned with the invitation Mrs Debates's attendance had not been entirely ruled out by her husband, despite having several small children to look after and being some seventy miles away—for Debates lived in his constituency and had merely a *pied-à-terre* in London.

'A martini.'

'I'd prefer a drop of Scotch.'

'I'm sorry, we haven't got any. Sherry. Beer.'

'Martini, then.' Debates was looking round the room, as though to discover the worst person in whose company he was going to be caught. 'Which is your wife, Alan?'

'She's in black—you can't quite see her.' Alan was struck by his inability to describe any of Ann's physical features.

'I look forward very much to meeting her—to seeing what your choice was.'

'Well, that's putting rather a burden on me.'

'Oh, I've complete confidence in your discrimination.'

Mrs Hunter appeared at Debates's elbow with a dish of chicken *vol-au-vents*: she was transformed from her normal self by a dark dress, an apron and a dusting of face powder. Debates without hesitation took one of the pastries and popped

it completely in his mouth, his large face accommodating not too ostentatiously what was nevertheless a considerable bulge. Alan remembered his cousin's family nickname—Pieface, a cognomen probably bestowed by Uncle George—and suddenly realized that it was descriptive, not as he had always thought and naturally imperfectly understood, of Charlie Debates's countenance but of his appetite and taste.

'Here is Ann,' said Alan, as his wife came up. He introduced them. He thought at first that Ann was laying on too thick the honour that the Minister had done their party (as he sometimes thought in a shop or restaurant that she over-emphasized her pleasure and humility at being served) but Debates seemed not to be in the least embarrassed. Ann went on to ask about Mrs Debates.

'She would have come, I haven't the slightest doubt,' said Debates. 'Had it not been for an indisposition she would have come. She'd have been very pleased to do so. But as a matter of fact she's got a nasty attack of boils.' He inclined his head towards his auditors. 'On the bottom.'

'How unpleasant for her,' said Ann, with a resource Alan found it impossible to match.

'Yes, and damn' awkward,' said Debates, not amused precisely (for it was difficult to imagine him in that condition) but in a lighter tone than seemed to be usual.

'I must see to the drinks,' said Alan, knowing himself incapable of holding his end up in such a conversation.

On his rounds he was stopped by Jack Pearson, who was talking to Jill Best and Eileen Jones, the wife of a BBC man who lived next door. 'I want to tell you of my theory of female spoil-sporting.'

'I've heard it.'

'These girls don't assent to it.'

'They provide the exceptions to it, no doubt.'

'Now the first proposition,' said Pearson, 'is that pleasure is a purely masculine emotion. Women do not understand it and are opposed to it. Hence, for example, the irrelevant feminine remark in the moment of passion. Or the feminine observation of the soloist's dress at the climax of a concert.'

'This is old stuff, Jack.'

'The man's a monster,' said Eileen Jones.

The room could be divided into two by folding doors, which were now, of course, open. Passing by the folded bulk of one door he found his wife behind it talking to a slight, fair, moustached man whose attitude of consistently looking up was due as much to his lack of neck as to his small stature. He proved to be the hoped-for guest, Arthur Wooles. Alan was somewhat surprised that this man, whose business ability and growing wealth Ann had emphasized, should be so undistinguished of feature, and should actually be observed to have a plug of cotton wool in his ear.

'Mr Wooles has brought this beautiful object,' said Ann, holding up a bottle of John Haig.

'How tremendously kind. I don't know when we last had whisky in the house.'

'No,' said Wooles, 'you can't exactly call it a drudge on the market these days.'

'Well, in this instance we shall obstruct the export drive with pleasure.'

'This isn't taken from any export order,' said Wooles, warmly. 'There's nobody supports the Government in that stronger than me.'

'I think we'd better open it,' said Alan, taking the bottle. 'Somebody was asking for whisky only a few minutes ago.'

'Well, it's made to be drunk,' said Wooles, laughing.

Alan went off to get the corkscrew. He felt himself going through the especially deft motions of one who has had a few drinks, and could not imagine why he did not feel entirely happy. Then he remembered the revealing neck of Ann's dress and felt a bad-tempered and nauseating wave of jealousy.

And yet, some time later, seeing her in a group with Wooles, Gagg and Debates his heart melted as he thought how impossible it was that anyone could be as close to her as he was. The two most notable guests, the potentates, had at last come together, and Alan could not help feeling something akin to pride as he saw under his roof, his drink in their hands, Charlie Debates inclining his head gravely to listen to what

Wooles was enthusiastically saying. It seemed to him most remarkable that far from there being ideological embarrassments between them (as could be only too easily expected when a successful business man met a Socialist politician) it might be that Wooles would actually have to prompt Debates to keep to the path of Labour orthodoxy. It gave him pleasure, too, to think that he had been the means of introducing to Debates so interesting and unusual a character as Wooles, and one so potentially useful to the Party.

It was as if they were mysteriously setting out to prove these speculations when he stepped up to the group and heard Debates say: 'Don't think we're proud of potato rationing. Don't think we're proud of it. In point of fact we're ashamed of it, bitterly ashamed of it. This isn't socialism, you know. Far from it. I'd call it the reverse of socialism.'

'But it's got to be, sir,' said Wooles. 'If there's going to be fair shares and fair prices.'

Debates did not repeat or add anything to his argument, but shook his head vigorously as though even to deny his approval of the principle of fairness in this situation.

'I mean,' Wooles went on, 'if a thing like the weather stultifies the flow of commodities to the market . . .'

Hearing Wooles's plausible use of English, Alan was taken back to the days of Mrs Wolstencroft's cruder but not less picturesque Malapropisms, and in his martini-bemused state wondered for a moment whether or not, since their names began with almost the same syllable, they might be related (which would account for their similar modes of speech)—just as when he had heard of Debates's success at the parliamentary election it seemed to him momentarily that his cousin was merely fulfilling an obvious destiny for a career in the legislative chamber, because of the appropriateness of his name.

The conversation had taken a turn towards Wooles's interests. Debates was deploring the aesthetic standards of postwar building.

'It's not our fault, sir,' responded Wooles. 'We always employ a good architect. It's the licensing authorities being so

austere with their amounts. It means we've got to pare everything in the building to the bone.' The reasonableness of Wooles's pronunciation could be seen when it was remembered that lack of art was precisely what Charlie was complaining about. 'But you ought to see the old people's homes we did at Erith,' said Wooles, adding, with careful regard to the Gallic custom of not sounding the termination of words: 'It's our *piè de résistance*. Of course, that was a Council job.'

Debates looked at his watch and overbearingly announced the necessity of his immediate departure. Alan saw him out.

'The little man with the fair moustache was called Wooles, was he?' said Debates, as though, in the conscientious way of a public man, to get the occasion sorted out.

'Yes. I think he's a builder, among other things. Perhaps that was obvious.'

'He was telling me that not many years before the war he was a bricklayer in Reading. Old trade unionist. You know, Alan, it's remarkable—the party has hosts and hosts of friends, sometimes where you'd last expect to find them. Even among the Enemy.'

'Well, he's Ann's friend, really,' Alan said, anxious that she should take the credit for this commendation.

'These are damn' steep stairs—don't you ever fall down them on your bottom?' Debates suited his action to the word by giving Alan a playful slap. The latter mused on his cousin's interest in posteriors, connecting it in some ill-conceived way with a walk they had taken in their youth when Debates had relieved himself *en plein air*. They stood for a few moments at the front door, and Charlie said, as they looked at a by no means modern or luxurious Austin standing in the street: 'My driver wouldn't come in.'

Alan saw the incongruity in a socialist using the word 'chauffeur', but, while admiring Debates's ingenuity in avoiding it, felt a pang of uneasiness at the euphemism.

'He's very shy,' Debates added. 'I ask him in to every function I can, but it's not often he obliges. I feel it's only proper that as far as possible he should do as I do.'

'Absolutely right.'

'Well, Alan, for me there's still a lot of work to be done tonight. Pressure, that's what one's fighting against. Never enough time. Tonight has been a delightful break.'

Turning back to the house after watching the car disappear, Alan found Wooles and Gagg descending the stairs. Up in the drawing-room he pressed drinks on the remaining guests with renewed vigour, feeling the imminence of their departure. Much later, when, as previously arranged, they had dined with Jack and Lilian Pearson in a nearby restaurant, Ann referred to this process of departing guests.

'I don't think you said good-bye to Mr Wooles,' she said. 'Or Bill Gagg, for that matter.'

'Oh yes, I did. I met them both on the stairs after I'd seen Charlie off.' He was hanging up his raincoat and went straight from this operation to the lavatory where, after spitting indulgently in the pan, he sang in a somewhat falsetto voice:

Once in the dear, dead days beyond recall . . .

Instantly he was transported to the days at Greenhead when his grandfather used to pass the bedroom door and he realized (looking at himself sideways in the mirror near the basin) that not only had he acquired a number of Mr Wrigley's habits but also that, despite the years he still had in hand, he was beginning to look like Mr Wrigley—though he had always imagined that his looks came from the dark, mysterious, paternal line.

In the bedroom Ann said: 'Are you sure you were friendly to Mr Wooles and Bill Gagg?'

'Yes, I was friendly to Mr Wooles and Bill Gagg.'

The fond facetiousness seemed lost on her. 'I thought Charles Debates was very pleased with himself.'

'Well, I suppose he's reason to be. Log cabin to White House. When you think he was brought up by poor Lottie . . .'

'You always have an excuse for other people's unsatisfactory behaviour or bad characters.'

'Do I?' He thought about this proposition. 'Still, in Charlie's case one really must make allowances.'

'You're uncritical of people.'

'I should have thought that wasn't a bad trait. But unfortunately it's not so. I have very severe thoughts about people. Take Lilian, for instance.' It seemed to him that several times lately they had had remarkably similar conversations to this, and a faint unease came over him in case these defects in him really existed and were offensive to her. Since her character was for him entirely overlaid by his love he could scarcely imagine that she in her turn could see him as a person with everyday deficiencies and grotesqueries. And yet he realized that it was somewhat sinister that she appeared not to accept his denials of possessing characteristics which displeased her.

Her reply to his rather feeble—because so obvious—educing of the example of Mrs Pearson was muffled by her at that moment carefully easing her dress over her head. Her slight unfamiliarity with the garment reminded him of its newness, and he said: 'Your dress looked very nice indeed, Annie.'

'I do hate that name,' she said, shaking her hair back as she stood upright.

His use of it dated from the arrival in London of the American musical play, *Annie Get Your Gun*, and he persisted with it perhaps because its proletarian flavour contrasted so satisfyingly with her good looks.

'Where did you get the coupons from?' The question was of jocular and idle intent, being forced from him partly by his mild embarrassment at her censure about 'Annie' and partly by his consciously virtuous suppression of a complaint about the lowness of the dress's neckline. However, he was aware that the number of coupons allowed to an individual by the Government in order to restrict his purchase of clothing by no means satisfied Ann's desires (for her absorbed and skilful interest in her clothes was one of the major concerns of her life) and he knew that she had on occasions been given coupons by Mrs Hunter, whose own wardrobe was exiguous.

'Bill Gagg, if you must know.'

'You mean Bill Gagg's coupons?'

'His or some he'd acquired.'

'You mean bought on the black market?'

She laughed. 'Well, don't make it sound as though they were dollars or something.'

'Is he a crook?'

'Oh, Alan, not everyone uses their coupons. It's not a great sin to get them passed on.'

'It's a criminal offence, though.'

'All right, I'm a criminal.'

In bed, just before they went to sleep, he took her hand. His index finger lay along her wrist so that he felt the beating of her pulse. He marvelled at this demonstration that her life was separate from his. He thought of her distinct existence—her being at school in Tunbridge Wells, her father's rather too regular drinking, her being one of five children, everything that had made her the individual she was. At the party she had said to Charlie Debates: 'Have another martini'—accentuating the final 'i' sound and baring her lips exaggeratedly at the 't'. He had blushed for her at the affectation, but now he saw that she had merely been betraying her nervousness at the occasion—unless this was merely yet another example of his lack of critical power and his habit of excusing the misdoings of others.

When from the Opposition benches it was said that the 'greatest danger of monopoly lay in the direction of inertia and inefficiency rather than profiteering' we heard a choice example of that nauseating pseudo-rising-above-the-battle that is the hallmark of the post-war Tory. It is also true that in rebutting the charge of inertia and inefficiency in the nationalized industries we had from the Government spokesman a specimen of typical post-war Labour cant—consumer interests, said Mr Morrison, can be capably and effectively protected by the consumer councils . . .

He put his pen down and looked through the window across the little light well at the wall of glazed white tiles, realizing for once how glibly he could produce the stuff. Since he certainly did not believe that Herbert was less than totally sincere about the consumer councils, what was the point of trying to score in this way and in a paragraph which, if it appeared at all in the

Watchman, was destined merely for the variably readable page two feature 'Seven Days'? He was reminded of his feeling of shock, of nasty gulfs, the other day when Jack Pearson had in a sentence questioned the whole purpose of 1945. 'White Guard Pearson,' he had said, laughing, 'the well-known Cossack littérateur.' He was, he was surprised to find, reviving the terms used among the staff of the *Express* just before the war, when the few recalcitrant right-wingers were the subject of such affectionate scorn from their radical colleagues. He might have said too (had the remark in this case not been too obviously inappropriate), that Jack 'did not like the working class', for this, after a decade, was still the simple but profound answer to criticisms of the left which purported to be made from subtle and serious positions.

His telephone rang. He picked up the receiver and said 'Percival'.

'This is Bill Gagg.'

'Oh, hello.' He did not know whether to say 'Bill' or 'Gagg' and so had to content himself with a faint grunt.

'I wondered if you were free for lunch.'

'Today?'

'Yes.'

'Well, yes, I am.' Alan seemed in the grip of a destiny driving him to lunch with Gagg.

'Do you know "Ninety-eight"?''

'What's that?'

'98 Dover Street. It's just called "Ninety-eight".'

'I see.'

'One-fifteen?'

'One-fifteen.'

When he put the receiver down he found he was alarmed at the prospect of an hour and a half in Gagg's company, remembering their meagre and colourless conversational exchange at the party. It had been feeble of him not to inquire what the man wanted—no doubt some piffling matter that could have been disposed of, by someone other than a business man, on the telephone.

'Ninety-eight' proved to be some sort of luncheon club,

with a barman in the dimly-lit bar whom Gagg addressed by his Christian name, and in the dining-room an effusive but English *maitre d'hôtel*, a flower in his black jacket. Feeling, as Gagg ordered their food and drink, the incongruity of their company, Alan wondered again about the purpose of their meeting. After all, Gagg was not even tied up with Ann's building society. As he watched Gagg hand back the menu in a hairy paw, Alan was all at once made hot and frightened by a spasm of jealousy, for since the society had turned down the mortgage application (or whatever it was) by Gagg's company what reason other than sexual interest was there for Ann to invite him to the party? Alan recalled the deep-cut dress she had worn on that occasion and the pain of associating it with Gagg's desire was lessened not at all by his remembering also that it was in fact he himself who had at last slid his finger into the visible cleft of her bosom. He thought how extraordinary it was that the first client of the building society to be friendly with Ann was a frustrated client, and was staggered that it had never occurred to him before. But then this was merely a prime example, he saw, of that incuriosity about people that Ann had sometimes charged him with, just as, years ago, encountering Harry White at *Resistance* and seeing his mutilated finger, he had never asked him how the accident had occurred, an omission which had always uncomfortably haunted him.

Yet, drinking his soup and hearing Gagg go on at some length about the cost and advantages of membership of 'Ninety-eight', it came to him that his jealousy had been quite absurd, for quite plainly it had been the tycoon Wooles, really, whom Ann, after whatever contact she had had with him at her office, had wished to get to know—in pursuance of this new interest of hers in money and its world. Or very possibly Wooles himself, through Gagg, had thought it not inadvisable to keep in touch even thus remotely with the building society, with a view to pursuing the failed application for a loan or putting in others.

They drank a bottle of claret. After the cheese, Gagg murmured: 'Let's have some brandy to settle our stomachs.'

When the waiter had gone he said: 'It was very interesting meeting Mr Debates at your enjoyable party the other week.'

'He liked meeting you, too. And Wooles. I think he was touched to find political sympathy from a world that usually displays so much hatred.'

'Well, now, that's one thing I'd like to talk to you about. We've been thinking that it would be nice to give a lunch or a dinner to Mr Debates. Personal to him, but perhaps with a theme—the fight against Communism, say. Not a big affair. Quite select. What do you think of that?'

Alan found it hard to have a thought about it at all. 'I'm sure he'd be very flattered.'

'Are you?'

'Oh yes.'

'Well, I'm very relieved you approve. Of course, there are one or two snags.'

It turned out that like Ann on the occasion of the party, Gagg was enlisting Alan's relationship to Debates to get the Minister along.

'But he's as likely to come for you as for me.'

'There's also the question of the guests,' said Gagg, with a frown. 'We thought it would be much better if the invitations were sent in your name.'

Alan could not help giving a short laugh of surprise. 'My name?'

'You see, all the people who are likely to go will know it through the *New Watchman*. They won't know Mr Wooles's or the Company's. We don't want the affair to be a fiasco, for Mr Debates's sake.'

'I couldn't possibly bring the *Watchman* into this.'

'No, no, no, no. I only meant that it was your well-known connections with the magazine that we were hoping to trade on.'

'I certainly am not well known.'

'We thought of asking Wynne-Davies to propose Mr Debates's health. Fellow Minister and all that.' Gagg pulled the tails of a passing waiter and said: 'Two more brandies, John.'

Meeting Ann in the entrance lobby of Kensington High Street Underground station at five-thirty, he still felt, not unpleasantly, the effects of this midday drinking. He said: 'All I seem to want is a cup of tea and a piece of toast.' They had met for an early dinner before a concert at the Albert Hall. 'I had a great boozy lunch.'

'Who with?'

'A friend of yours, really.'

She expressed suitable mystification.

'Let's just have a swift little stroll to blow the cobwebs away,' he said. He took her soft arm, feeling pleasure in their lack of urgent purpose among the homeward-hurrying crowds. 'It was Bill Gagg.'

'What did he want?'

He told her of the plan to honour Debates.

'Did you say you'd do it?'

'Not exactly.'

'I bet you left him wondering.'

'Well, I'm not sure precisely what I'm required to do.' The trees of the park came into view, very green against the pavements and roads, just wetted by a shower.

'You ought to do your best to help Debates,' she said.

He had been thinking of the problem as one of helping Gagg, and he was impressed, as he often was, by the superiority of her point of view in the practical affairs of life. 'Perhaps I ought.'

'I must just cross over and look at that suit,' she said, eyeing a shop window.

Coming to a decision as to how to deal with Gagg coincided with a wave of love for her and a sharp and happy anticipation of the evening ahead of them. 'I am looking forward to hearing the "Concerto for Orchestra" again,' he said, hoisting her gently up the kerb of the opposite pavement.

'Wrong colour,' she said. 'I thought it might be that nice shade of ~~red~~, but there's too much blue in it.'

Alan found the lavatory, like a distinguished club or a ward in a workhouse, full of old men. When coffee had been served the Chairman, not without a music-hall innuendo, had announced

a ten-minute interval before the speeches. Almost all had left the table.

Alan at length secured a compartment. A stout bald man a few places away said jocularly: 'Will someone whistle?'

At this the yellow-faced man with a deaf-aid in an enormous ear, standing next to Alan, gave a few coughing chuckles. From behind, a quavering voice said: 'Come on, young man, *you* shouldn't take long.' More coughs.

Some of the faces—such as that of Wynne-Davies—were archetypally familiar, their only strangeness being their colour, preternaturally pink after being seen for years merely as images in newspapers or newsreels. By the wash-basins, clothes brush in hand, stood a figure who, had it not been for his bloodstain-coloured livery, would have appeared more than likely to be one of the country's rulers, for even in the process of removing scurf from corpulent or bowed shoulders he retained a stiff dignity and an almost alarming superciliousness of countenance—his brushing motions being indeed of a most perfunctory nature for which the large pieces of silver in the saucer on the table at his side seemed a disproportionate reward (though whether they had been placed there by third parties was in doubt as much on account of the surreptitious nature of his present clients' donations as of the value of the coins).

Whether through haste to return to the dinner table or merely because of the uncertain fingers of old age, some failed to 'adjust their dress' in the room presided over by the liveried attendant, continuing to fumble as they moved through the door and even down the corridor. Alan passed these halting figures, weaving through them with a turn of speed and agility perhaps attributable to the considerable drink he had so far consumed, and, at the end of the corridor, almost colliding with Bill Gagg who was coming the other way.

'Is Mr Wooles in there?' he said, with the who'e-hearted anxiety of a devoted employee.

'I think not,' said Alan, speculating about but immediately rejecting the notion that Wooles might have been one of those timid or especially strictured visitors who merely for a lesser

purpose had shut themselves away in one of the solitary compartments.

'I wanted him to join Mr Wynne-Davies.'

'Wynne-Davies is certainly in there.'

'Is he?' Gagg seemed to hover between the certainty of going forward to find the Minister and a more speculative search elsewhere for his master, seeming to Alan in this moment less formidable, more human, even pitiable.

'I say, who's paying for all this? Awfully good food and drink. A bit embarrassing for the MPs, I thought, to have all that food put before them.'

'The dinner's no more than five shillings a head,' said Gagg, even in the middle of his search finding time to be pedestrian and explanatory. 'The regulation's definitely not being broken. It would be more than "Ninety-eight's" reputation was worth. Of course, they charge extra for the flowers on the table and so forth.'

'Ah.'

'I think I had better go and look in there.'

'Do,' said Alan. He continued back to the dining-room, thinking indulgently that after all Gagg was not a bad sort of chap. Previously in the evening he had been seized by an almost causeless depression, strange for him. He had arrived in the purlieu of Dover Street too early for the dinner and to pass the time had strolled along Piccadilly, past the motor-car showrooms and down the hill. Perhaps being alone and seeing the couples just met for the evening—linking arms, talking excitedly—had induced his sharp nostalgia, not at all the half-guilty feeling of adventure and potentiality he sometimes had on the rare occasions he was out for an evening's entertainment without Ann. He thought: I love her. And he coupled with this a rather schoolboyish resolve 'to do better'—not that he was conscious of any particular deficiency in himself but feeling that the quality of his love demanded from him kindness, unselfishness, and so forth, in greater measure than might be forthcoming without his trying.

Even this contemplation of his future increase of virtue left him far from happy. The ant-like traffic and people had no

doubt revived what was never far below his consciousness—the belief that the cultured world was bound to be blown up by atomic bombs. He began to think through the corollary business of removing Ann and himself to some part of the planet where the bombs might not fall—a piece of simple fantasy wish-fulfilment as constant with him now as bowling fast or kissing a girl had been at earlier periods of his life. And yet . . . it could be done: nothing but inertia bound them here. Samoa or the Seychelles could actually receive them, lap them in perpetual peace. So deep was he in this daydream that he thought absurdly that to go would be ratting on the Labour movement in its years of trial, and then that, after all, he would be prevented by Ann, whose love of clothes and other matters entirely the product of civilization she could never give up. The notions vanished as soon as they were formulated, but nevertheless left him with the same sense of unease that he had suffered at the party to which they had invited Debates, so that for a moment he imagined it was the Minister he was thus faintly worried about. Indeed, when he pondered on the matter he realized that the re-entry of Charlie into his life was a complicating and somewhat tedious element that had so far brought no compensatory advantages. But it was not his cousin that was the common factor in all this. What *was*, was hard to put a name to. He recalled—and it was of three or four occasions telescoped for the purpose of the thought into one—offering Ann an embrace and being convinced of a response from her of *mêre* endurance: for them a quite new concept of married life. However, perhaps this was simply a commonplace instance of Jack Pearson's principle of spoil-sporting.

It occurred to him (as he wondered if he had time to cross over into the park, where the trees and grass of early summer lay like the attractive but unvisitable landscape in the background of a portrait) that this indifference to the physical by no means ruled out in the mysterious workings of feminine emotion a wish for its results: and no doubt, also, the cogent arguments that they had used to postpone having children—the unsuitability of the flat, Ann's remunerative work, the Bomb itself—weighed with her in reality not at all. When he

thought of her spending her evening without him she seemed at one moment pathetic, the next formidably free and independent, by no means bound to the flat or, indeed, to any of the routines of living they had established together. He decided not to cross the road, and began slowly to retrace his steps. Passing the chemist's, its rather consciously old-fashioned air reminded him of the chemists of his youth, and then of a riddle he had been fond of in the days when riddles seemed to him to give him a wonderful power to astonish and amuse. 'What smells most in a chemist's shop?' It had been an indication of the brilliance of this particular example that when told the answer—'your nose'—he had at first conceived for the purpose of the jest an organ, perhaps because bunged up with catarrh, which did, indeed, give off an odour outdoing in pungency the herbs and soaps and unguents of the emporium, an interpretation which seemed, then, hardly less satisfying than the true one. When he arrived at 'Ninety-eight' he was still too soon.

It was neither Wooles nor Gagg who rose after dinner, when all had at last returned to the tables, but a man with a small, clipped, white moustache unknown to Alan, who nevertheless in the course of his speech referred exaggeratedly to 'our young friend from the *Watchman* who has done so much to make this little occasion possible'. He then made some heavily ironical remarks about the *Watchman's* leftness. 'But however much we may on occasions disagree with its point of view, one thing can be said and one thing must be said, its hatred of Communism and the Communists is second to none.' There was actually some applause at this, though Alan could not help thinking that the company was too few to behave as a corporate audience. Nor did there seem quite that ease and conviviality at the centre necessary to ensure a wholly successful evening. Wynne-Davies had sat throughout dinner with a glass of some bilious cordial at his hand, evidently a teetotaller. Charlie Debates, eating and drinking with more enjoyment, seemed nevertheless unrelaxed, like a priest in a public house. Between them Arthur Wooles (Alan guessed) lacked the *bonhomie* and *savoir-faire* to mark the occasion for these two as one on which they ought to expand, be brilliant and enjoy themselves.

'Mr Minister,' said the white-moustached man, turning and bending slightly towards Debates, 'we who are condemned to pass our lives in the world of property salute you for the work you are doing. We think you could do a little more for us' (there were one or two 'hear hears' at this and a short, rather unfriendly laugh) 'but we appreciate your difficulties and we live somewhat in hope . . .'

When it was Charlie's turn to speak Alan recalled a remark of his grandfather's, forgotten till now, made about the young Debates: 'Sometimes he can talk the hind leg off a donkey.' The metaphor was no clearer to Alan now than in those old days, but its indication of unwearying and perhaps miraculous eloquence was certainly remarkably apt. He thought how extraordinary it was that the qualification for absolute power over the lives of others need only be loquaciousness.

By virtue of his relationship Alan felt somewhat responsible for Debates's speech, being particularly apprehensive lest there should be some injudicious allusion to bottoms. But nothing came from Charles that was not fluent, orthodox and undisturbing. 'Major Churchyard,' he said, in his turn inclining somewhat to the white-moustached man, 'I thank you most warmly for your kindly references to me. Contrary to what would appear from the pages of what I might call the baronial press, I believe in the necessity for the prosperity of this country of ours. We have built our great position in the world not only on the skill of our manufacturers and their men but also on the acumen of our merchants. And, again, the foundations of our interests overseas have been laid on a vigorous and developing economy at home. No one would be more delighted than I if all the restrictions that hamper that skill and that vigour and that development could be removed . . .'

Alan could not help recalling, his critical powers activated rather than otherwise by the drink, of Pearson's lese-majesty towards Labour, and wondering, as he thought of Brierley Court, 'the Arguers', the patient poor old men of the Holborn Labour Party, whether it had all really come to this—a Socialist Minister apologizing for the controls required to achieve social justice. Such depressed thoughts seemed for

some reason to receive confirmation when, passing the little bar in the anteroom after dinner, he saw Charlie drinking lager in great swallows, looked on benignly by Arthur Wooles.

Later, after he had extricated himself from a group saying their farewells on the steps of 'Ninety-eight' and was making his way towards Piccadilly, he heard Charlie's voice behind him calling his name. He turned and stopped, and Charlie came up to him accompanied by his 'driver'. He was smoking a cigar, which he held between his lips only as though it were a cigarette, the whole effect being of a pouting infant with a 'comforter'.

'Eric couldn't find a space for the car by that place,' he said genially. 'Not like you to be defeated, is it, lad?' His tones were of a more northern tinge than usual.

The chauffeur, a pale young man with a suspicion of sideboards emerging from his peaked cap, said nothing.

'We'll give you a lift as far as Pimlico, won't we, Eric?' said Debates.

The back of the ministerial limousine had the odour and the immense space for the passengers' legs of the car that could be hired from *Resistance*. Then the smell of Debates's cigar wafted over. 'They pester me, you know, Alan,' he said. 'I'll go anywhere and meet anyone if it's for the good of the country. But they've all got their own little selfish problems that they think I can work out for them.'

'I'm afraid it was through me that you were involved in this thing tonight,' Alan said, though without seriously thinking himself at fault.

The West End whirled fragmentarily past the windows, as Eric twisted along an esoteric route towards Victoria. Charlie had put his cigar back in his mouth and was humming round it so that it seemed a musical instrument, perhaps of that kind with limited range and non-functional form made for the very young. When he took it out, he said: 'Of course, one owes it to one's family to think about the future. One won't be drawing a ministerial salary for ever.'

'They'll never sack you, Charles. You're the coming man.'

'But I can't be in the Government under the Tories.'

'No, not even you.' The facetious promptness of Alan's response skilfully hid his astonishment at Charlie's anticipation that Labour might some time go down in a General Election, for since the victory of 1945, which had embodied so perfectly and miraculously the hopes of the previous *lustrum*, a Conservative Government had seemed contrary to the natural order.

'You see, Alan, I haven't got a practice and I wouldn't have the money to buy one. Everything that Mother left is sunk in my house at the coast. What would I do if I lost my seat?'

'Wouldn't someone offer you a nice job?'

'Well, that's it. One gets these offers now—hints of them, anyway. But would they be made if one were out of the Government, out of the House? You know, Alan, I never in my life thought of myself as a business man. But one sees that one might be extremely useful as a solicitor in some of these enterprises. Take the property world, for instance.'

'Charles, I think this is the best place for me to get out.'

'Is it? All right.' Debates leaned forward and tapped the glass behind Eric's head.

As he stood on the pavement, watching the car draw away, he could not help remembering his grandfather's agnosticism about poor Lottie's complaints of poverty, and wondered if the trait—which Alan saw was the result of too great a concern for money—had been inherited by her son. When he got home he told Ann all this, sitting on the bed, to which she had already retired. She did not comment on his analysis of Charlie's character, but said: 'Did you arrange to see him again?'

'No. Should I have done?'

'Of course.'

'Why?'

'Don't you want to get on in life?'

'I don't follow that seeing Charlie Debates has a bearing on that.'

Her eyes fell back on her book, and, baffled by her dissatisfaction, he got up and started to undress. After a few moments he said: 'What business was it Wooles came to the society about?'

She put the marker in her book, closed it and looked up. 'Fancy you taking an interest in that.'

'You're very stern tonight,' he said, but a shred of anxiety in his stomach told him that it was wrong thus to connote a mere temporariness in her mood.

'Please, Alan.'

'What was it, anyway?'

'A mortgage on a block of flats in the Finchley Road. We turned it down, as you know.'

'What has it got to do with Charlie Debates?'

She laughed. 'Nothing at all.'

'I'm not an absolute fool, darling,' he said, conscious that perhaps he had been one until just now. 'I realize that Wooles has been cultivating Charlie—and on no small scale.'

'Oh, that's not to do with the Finchley Road property. Besides, what's wrong with Wooles getting to know Debates?'

'I don't know. He got to know him through me, though. Through you as well. Was that party fixed up specially for them to meet?'

'Well, they met there.'

'I see. You told Wooles that I knew Charlie and then Wooles asked you to arrange a meeting.'

'Nothing like that in the least.'

'I must ask you to tell me what Wooles wants out of Charlie.'

She sprang out of bed and then out of the room—so suddenly and so promptly following his question that he imagined that she had gone for some documentary evidence about Wooles's business—until he heard her in the lavatory. He stood, occupationless, staring into space.

When she returned he said: 'You still haven't answered my question.'

'What question?'

He repeated it and was scarcely surprised to hear Ann characterize it as silly. 'There're all sorts of things they've got in common,' she added. 'Besides people do get to meet Government and local authority top brass. It's done every day of the week.' She put her book on her side table. 'Do hurry up, darling. It's terribly late.'

In bed, before he turned out his bedside lamp, he said: 'Wooles surely wouldn't spend all that money on the dinner without having something concrete in mind.'

Her head, facing him, was sunk in the pillow: from the one, pale blue eye that regarded him he could not divine her expression. Her voice was rather muffled. 'What Wooles does is really nothing to do with me.'

When he pursued the point she rolled quickly on her back and said in exasperation: 'Well, Wynne-Davies was there, as you've already said. Perhaps that was sufficient excuse for the party.'

'You baffle me more.'

'Darling, it's quite simple. One of Mr Wooles's companies is interested in an hotel, or would be if it wasn't requisitioned for the Estate Duty people or something.'

'So they're persuading Charlie to de-requisition it.'

'I don't think he needs any persuading. The Estate Duty people are moving back to London, anyway. But there's apparently a possibility that the military will have it then.'

'Wynne-Davies's lot.'

'Yes.'

'He's got to be persuaded, too.'

'I wish you'd switch your light off. It's shining in my eyes.'

In the dark the complications of Wooles's affairs seemed to him more monstrous than ever. 'It's absolutely unbelievable.'

'Darling, you do take up a strange attitude. The whole thing is simply cutting red tape. If there hadn't been this direct approach Debates's department would have doodled on for six months before making up its mind, then Wynne-Davies's would have taken another six. In the meantime the public have one less hotel.'

'Whatever you say, it's perfectly clear that there's been some dirty work at the crossroads. What's so disconcerting is that I've helped with it.'

She went to sleep while things to say still rose to his mind. They were lying under a single sheet because of the warmth of the night. The curtains were drawn back to let in the air and the room was illuminated by a faint light whose yellowness,

emanating from the street lamp below, could nevertheless be distinguished. These features began to take on for him the vivid but unimportant qualities of the background scenery to some nasty anxiety. He saw now the simple mechanics of Wooles's operations. One buys, or takes an option on—for a much depressed price—a lease of property which is still subject to requisitioning. Then one persuades the Minister concerned to de-requisition. Or if the Minister is truly your creature he gives you the tip as to which properties he intends to de-requisition.

He was quite surprised, on waking, to think he had managed to go to sleep with the burden of the Wooles business on his mind. He heard, from the half landing, the sound of Ann's bath water escaping. Her hours were strict and in the morning she left the house long before he did. One of the pleasures of his life was lying lethargically in bed watching her dress, sometimes hastily, sometimes with enough time to lacquer her finger-nails, or iron a blouse, in the middle of it. Today his return to consciousness was accompanied by a sense of unease, and before she came back he had half hoisted himself up on the pillow and lit a cigarette.

'How do?' he said to her, in imitation of his grandfather's greeting to his more proletarian acquaintances, perhaps hoping by uttering this cliché of his matutinal habits to dispel any disaster pending in the day.

'The bath plug's come off the chain.'

'Interesting.'

She sat in her dressing-gown at the mirror and began to comb her hair.

He said, quite without premeditation, as though it had been the constant subject of now forgotten dreams: 'I can't understand why you went to the trouble of arranging for Wooles to meet Charlie.'

'It wasn't any trouble.'

'I mean at that stage the Society had already turned the proposition down.'

She put her comb down with a little clatter and said, as she

rose: 'I must say you make this an awfully boring subject, sweetie.'

'Did you do it because you'd fallen for friend Gagg?' The question (which had just occurred to him) was not entirely frivolous because as he uttered it he saw that it might touch her on the raw since she clearly had a quite exaggerated respect for Wooles and his henchman.

She had opened her dressing-gown and was clipping on her naked body the black apparatus (with its accommodation to the realities of anatomy, like an elaborate item of chivalrous armour) for holding up her stockings. She finished this operation before saying: 'You're so terribly crude, Alan.'

Gazing at her, he thought that once the word 'waist' had connoted for him a completely unphysical concept, not this pair of almost exaggerated curves.

'I'm right, then?' he said, prolonging the business with the dogged tedium of one who will not admit to himself that his point was originally silly.

She picked up her brassière but instead of putting it on drew her dressing-gown round her again and sat on the stool as though she had time to spare. 'I don't know,' she said.

It was not so much her words as their emotional tone that communicated to him an overwhelming amazement which brought him scrambling over the bed to gaze closely at her. 'I don't understand it at all. What do you mean?' He tried to imagine that this face he knew so well had been involved in activities outside his knowledge. He finished feebly: 'Have you been seeing him?'

'Yes, I have,' she said, sadly.

His disbelief seemed supported by his knowledge of Gagg's whereabouts (without her) the previous night. Nevertheless he was prepared to pursue the subject. 'Why?' he asked in a voice louder than usual. 'Why?'

'Darling, I've got to work it out.'

In a few minutes he understood that it was a question of her choosing between him and Gagg, and even in the crisis of his bewilderment he had the opportunity to speculate about his own deficiencies and his rival's virtues—both of them un-

apparent, for to him it seemed the height of feminine quirkishness even to consider the prosaically-minded and -occupied Gagg as against himself. But while Ann spoke—though her words were generalized and almost conventional—he began to see that it was not so much Gagg's brain or even appearance that was at issue but the unknown and perhaps formidable and dangerous whole physical man. With this realization came the notion that Ann's body, too, was involved, and a pain so intense grew (not inappropriately) in his heart that it seemed to him there ought to be some simple and efficacious remedy for it, like aspirin.

It was this intolerable hurt, rather than her saying again 'I've got to work it out', that prompted him suddenly to put his hands on her shoulders (as though preparatory to implanting a chaste kiss) and then to shake her so savagely that her teeth came audibly together. 'I won't have you seeing him,' he said. 'I won't have it.' The words seemed not to be his, to come from some remote epoch, perhaps borrowed from Nellie, the maid at Greenhead.

'Please, please,' she ejaculated, as remotely and urgently as if it were a stranger who had touched her.

He released her, alarmed and dismayed at the crude violence but thinking that it was surely justified and that she must come to regard it so. His action had exposed her breast, but the sight of it firmly yet with a tender curve set on her chest, was merely embarrassing to him, as though it belonged to a relative within the prohibited degree of consanguinity. He could not understand why his teeth were hurting (for they had been involved in neither the physical nor the emotional part of the transaction) until he realized that he had been clenching them with insane ardour during his absurd assault on her.

And now, because of that ungentlemanly act, as he tried to get from her the precise state of her infatuation, it was she who had become the injured party. She dressed hastily, saying more than once that she was terribly late, and he felt that she was slipping away from him for ever, that he could not bear being left with the great wound of his imprecise suspicions, that he was about to lose control of her life. He stood in the

kitchen watching her make and drink her coffee, feeling in his pyjamas like an invalid looking hopelessly on healthy life. He even had time to think a little beyond his own pain, and say: 'I feel I ought to go and tell Charlie about the de-requisitioning business—and that bogus dinner.'

Looking back, after she had left the house, at the whole episode it seemed to him that at this remark she had momentarily emerged from the remote, injured frigidity to which his hurting of her had driven her. 'Why should you do that?'

'It's obvious, isn't it?' he had replied, and perhaps she would have taken up the argument had it not been for what without a doubt was her feminine sense of the ultimate unimportance of material matters of that kind. For he came clearly to see that though Ann might initially have been willing, even rather pleased, to act as the link between Wooles's empire and the Minister, once her relationship with Gagg had been established that for her could stand—must inevitably stand—quite divorced from the political or financial appendages of non-domestic life. At the same time, no doubt his threatening to go to Debates and thereby put a spoke in Gagg's wheel would have scarcely helped to heal the gap opening up between them.

Again, in retrospect, the agonizing conversation lost some of its suddenness and surprise, and he began to imagine that subconsciously he had known it was coming, that the few years of his marriage had been preparing for just that, as a war is sometimes ushered in by a period of particular prosperity and calm.

It occurred to him as, later that morning in the *Watchman* office he picked up his telephone at last and asked the girl to get the Ministry number, that no one would know the extent of his virtue in pursuing so promptly the matter of Charlie's temptation. Not only did it seem irrelevant beside his own anguish, but he had to overcome a deep distaste at interfering in another's intimate affairs. Besides, in certain moments it seemed ludicrous to conceive that in England a high servant of the Crown might be in danger of succumbing to bribery or making an unfair preference. With relief he heard Charles's private secretary say that his master had no time to spare until

the day after tomorrow. When Alan had put the receiver down it occurred to him that he ought not to be dependent on Charlie's official timetable. He got through to Anthony Perry again and wormed out of him the Minister's private address in London and its telephone number.

At ten o'clock, the hour appointed for Alan to call at the St George's Square flat, Debates had still not returned home. Breathing somewhat heavily from his ascent of numerous internal staircases, Alan was confronted at the open door by a small man with cropped grey hair wearing a large brass stud in the neck of his collarless shirt in the manner of Mr Sugden that day many years ago when he had called with his grandmother on her sister-in-law at the house not far from Greenhead. 'Why don't you come in and wait for him?' said this individual, in a voice that took Alan back to the days when on the fringe of 'the Arguers' he had divided his attention between his ball and the fluent, hoarse, proletarian voices deep within the circle. He was led into a sitting-room with a hint of the attic about its ceiling: its furniture, dark and shabby and with a complete lack of distinction, reminded him of the Wolstencrofts'.

'Sit you down,' said the collarless man. 'I'm David Robson. Mr Debates and I share these rooms.'

In the name Alan recognized an MP for a northern constituency, a very far from celebrated politician. Alan explained his relationship to Charlie, his position at the *Watchman*.

'I was just going to make myself a cup of cocoa,' said Robson. 'Will you have one?'

Alan saw that a kettle was very gently boiling on the gas ring that was an offshoot of the gas fire: on his accepting the invitation Robson put cocoa into two cups, added sugar and a little water from the kettle to each, and ground the ensuing mixture to a slime before adding more boiling water and a dash of milk from a bottle of milk whose empty part was dubiously mottled by a film of curd. 'That's the secret of making cocoa,' said Robson, pronouncing the word 'coker', 'thorough mixing with a drop of hot water first.'

'I see.'

Robson took up from the top of the gas fire a half-smoked cigarette and lit it with a lighter of antique design which sent up a blue, popping flame as high as his nose. 'What d'you want with the great man?' he asked. 'Interview?'

'No, it's a personal matter.' Alan was surprised and not unmoved to hear Charlie spoken of in terms of familiar awe: he wondered if after all he were not wasting his time coming here and warning him about the duplex Wooles.

'It'd be just like him to arrange something of the sort at this hour of the night. If it was for the good of the Ministry, the good of the country.'

'Really?'

Robson drained his cup and rose to take Alan's. 'Perhaps that's something you intellectuals of the Movement'll never understand. In the end we're all working for England.'

'Well . . .' Alan began.

Robson retreated a few steps and opened a long cupboard in the wall to reveal a little basin, at which he proceeded to wash up the cocoa cups. 'When I got my CBE this year, the King said to me . . .'

At this moment there was a squeaking of the floorboards outside and a moment later Charles Debates entered, wearing with his dinner jacket a black Homburg hat. He, too, was panting somewhat from the climb up the stairs, and soon the sweetish aroma of respired spirits filled the room. He greeted Alan with affable condescension.

'We've just had coker, Mr Percival and me,' said David Robson. 'Can I make you a cup?'

'No, thanks, Robbo,' said Debates, taking off his hat and revealing a red rim round his forehead, like the start of some unspeakable torture. 'I think I've put enough food into my stomach for tonight.'

'He's too conscientious,' said Robson, using the third person despite addressing his subject, as though talking of a baby or dog. 'He goes to too many of these business men's dinners. Very bad for the health. Very bad. He was at one only last night.'

'I know,' said Alan. 'That's what I've come about.'

'Well, I'm off to bed,' said Robson. 'I'll leave you two to it. You didn't ought to be long, Charlie. Good night, all.'

'What about a night-cap, Alan?' said Debates, when his co-tenant had disappeared.

'I think not, after cocoa.'

Debates poured himself a drink from a half bottle of Scotch and went to the tap to add water. It struck Alan as heart-warming confirmation of the democratic system—and a negation of all that his visit implied—that it should be merely a half bottle in Charlie's cupboard, whether that betokened a Minister's comparative poverty or his inability, like any other citizen, to get hold of a whole bottle in an epoch of shortages.

Now that the moment had at last arrived when he could speak to Charlie, he found himself convinced of the preposterousness of his errand, just as the symptoms of illness disappear in a doctor's surgery. He could scarcely conceive his urgency of the morning that had arranged this encounter, nor understand how he had managed to pass the evening until the time of its arrival. He said: 'It's very kind of you to see me at this late hour, Charles.'

'What's this about the dinner last night?'

'I think that chap Wooles is trying to get at you. Well, I'm sure he is.'

'Trying to get at me?' Despite the inauspicious surroundings, Debates's air of dignity and self-sufficiency became accentuated.

'About the Grand Hotel. And probably other property. I know from your point of view it may sound ridiculous, but I thought I ought to tell you everything I know.' He began with the abortive application to Ann's building society.

He had not got very far into his narrative before Debates said: 'Alan, I wish I had you tied to the mast.'

Though the point of this remark was far from apparent, Debates's pause after voicing it was evidently designed for Alan's comment. 'Why?' Alan asked dutifully, feeling, as he often did in his cousin's presence, of infantile status.

'Then I could flog you within an inch of your life.'

Alan could not help his responding laugh sounding foolish. 'I know it's absurd to think you could ever succumb to the blandishments of someone like Wooles.'

'It's not that. What you are describing is merely one of the normal incidents of a Minister's life. Everybody I meet is trying to impress upon me the uniqueness of his own case, why I should break the rules for him. In a way I welcome it, Alan. How otherwise would I know what the desires and frustrations of the business community were? Answer me that.'

It struck Alan that he had once heard Charlie take a quite different view and complain of being pestered. He said: 'But this seems to be quite a deep-laid plot to get hold of you and influence your judgment.' As he uttered the word 'plot' Alan realized that the dress Ann had worn on the night of the party for Charlie had been bought not only with Gagg's coupons but his money, and a suffocating wave of horror passed over him as he summoned up the image (analogous to those in films where a lover clasps a bracelet on the wrist of his innamorata) of Gagg slipping the dress over Ann's head.

'I hope you're not one of those who subscribe to the theory that since we Socialist politicians are poor and haven't had the best of educations we're susceptible to undue influence and corruption.'

'That's what Grandpa used to think.'

'Did he? Well, you knew him better than I did. I must say, for my part, I never had a great deal of sympathy for him.'

Immediately Alan tried to conceive Mr Wrigley as an unamusing or unendearing character. 'I can imagine that he got on some people's nerves. And of course, Charles, I don't see a J. H. Thomas in every Labour minister of today. I just thought you ought to know that some rather dubious characters were out to butter you up.'

Debates rose with the half bottle of whisky. 'I think it will just do a couple more. Come along, Alan, I don't like solitary drinking.'

'All right.'

When Debates went to the tap with the two tumblers Alan

observed that the edge of the runner by the cupboard was as hueless and as threadbare as an ancient tapestry. ·

‘I had to speak tonight,’ said Debates, returning with the drinks. ‘It always takes the virtue out of me, as it were. A difficult audience, too. Perhaps you’ve never had to talk to a crowd of business men after they’ve had a good dinner. They won’t stand any nonsense, you know. The inhibitions have gone. You can as easily get cat-calls as hear hears. But I give it them straight. I tell them I don’t like profits but that as long as there are profits to be made I’m going to see that they have the opportunity of earning them. It’s really the same point that I’ve made earlier tonight, Alan—the economy, the country, has got to *work*.’

As was implied by Robson, Debates, on entering the room, had looked far from his best, but the various comforts of his *pied-à-terre*—the whisky, the pink wicker chair, the unlacing of his patent leather shoes—had brought a better colour to his face, and his eyes glittered, all the more noticeably under the low wattage of the single hanging lamp. Alan wondered if it were Charlie who had absorbed Robson’s economic philosophy or vice versa. The phenomenon was once more borne fancifully in on him of the similarity of all practical politicians—so that Labour agent was like Tory agent, Minister like Minister: evolving the same protective characteristics in a dominating habitat.

‘And these dinners are supposed to come under the heading of pleasure,’ Charlie was saying. ‘Actually, I’ve still to do the work of the evening.’

‘You’re going to work at this hour?’

‘Certainly. The night is young. I’ve a box in there packed full with stuff.’ Debates inclined his head towards some further, no doubt monastic, chamber.

Alan was touched at Charlie saying ‘packed full’, a tautology he remembered his father years ago excising from his own speech habits. ‘I must go and leave you to it.’

‘No hurry. No hurry. I’ve enjoyed our chat.’

‘I feel I’ve wasted your time.’

‘No, you felt you had a duty to do.’ Debates stretched his

arms and extended his legs: his body, like Alice's in the White Rabbit's house, seemed grotesquely too big for the room. 'Suppose—just suppose for a moment—that I had been showing favours to our friends' organizations. That I'd de-requisitioned their hotel and seen that they'd got a building licence to put it back in working order. And then done what was necessary to free any other property that they'd got an option on. And produced licences for that. And so on. What action would you have taken? Eh? You'd have lashed me to the mast.' Charlie drew in his feet and leaned forward, eyeing Alan keenly. His expression was scarcely one of amusement, yet it was evident that he was in good humour. 'And then what?' he asked. 'Then what would you have done?'

The answer sprang patly but involuntarily to Alan's lips, the stunningly out-of-character behaviour of one who has been given orders in hypnosis: 'Flogged you within an inch of your life.'

They parted at the head of the first downward flight of stairs, Debates at last removing the hand that had affectionately guided Alan's shoulders through the flat and which struck him as so mysteriously different from the hand that eighteen years before might well have given him a punch in the abdomen. 'Shut all the doors after you,' said Charlie.

Some of these were situated strangely at the bottom of staircases. As Alan put further barriers between himself and the politicians he became aware again of the ache under his ribs, the counterpart of his knowledge of Ann's love of Gagg. For a moment the situation was unbelievable, something he had dreamt, heard about of another; and then the pain settled in as remotely but agonizingly and inescapably himself, like a diseased limb. Though he had not long ago left her at home, he could not help imagining that in the interim she had flown to her lover (whose very name, at first silly, almost bizarre, now seemed to Alan of alarming serviceability). The phrase she had used during their evening's exhausting discussion returned to him as outrageously as a declaration of war: 'I'm going away with him.'

Perhaps it was not his own person so much as their common

memories, jokes, mutual reliance, that it seemed to him so insanely pathetic for her to be contemplating giving up. How could she possibly bear to squander in a few days this lovingly and laboriously accumulated fortune? But then he realized that warm and emotional as she was, her eyes sometimes quick to fill with tears, she was the reverse of sentimental: as indifferent to the fate of mice and spiders as now she was to him. Not for her the shock that had come to him on conceiving that the state of matrimony need have no counterpart in reality to its theoretical permanency.

He kept remembering the juxtaposition this morning of the revelation of her ceasing to love him and her getting unconcernedly dressed. Recalling her body was like an invalid contemplating physical feats impossibly gross and pleasurable.

VI

Only when he called at the box office, before the performance began, to see if they had succeeded in selling the spare ticket did it occur to Alan that he might have used it to take Jack Pearson or someone—a good example of his northern parsimony or, rather, inability to behave gracefully. Perhaps this was precisely why Ann had left him, for he was only just beginning to realize that matters which against any rational scale were unimportant might nevertheless be important to women, as, for example, Iris's deficiencies in the brewing of tea had been to his grandmother.

They had sold the ticket. As he moved away from the box office to smoke a last cigarette among the pillars of the entrance he wondered if it might not be Ann who had bought it—for she could well have come to realize after all that his love for her was what mattered in her life and, too diffident to approach him direct, decided to attend this performance that she knew he was attending—for, strange to consider, at the time he had booked the seats nothing apparently threatened their marriage

—in the hope of encountering him. Despite the pain she had caused him, his breast at this thought filled with excitement, and he saw the hand trembling that held his cigarette. The thing was made all the more plausible by the evident success of this visiting German company and the consequent shortage of seats.

When his daydream ended he was staggered by the notion of their mutual loss, flooded by a pathos as intense as that of a celebrated parting in a work of art, so that the tears were brought to his eyes, as they had been brought by these feelings a score of times since Ann's going. In the days before her departure, when sometimes his jaw had literally ached with talking to her, he had sometimes imagined (as foolishly as now) that it was impossible for her to leave because of the unresolvable complications of her possessions and documentation—the little knee-hole desk she had inherited from a great-aunt, for example, or her passport being a joint affair with his. But in the end her whole life with him seemed to go in a couple of suitcases. Or perhaps it was that she had put her soul during these years only into the acquisition of a few beloved and becoming garments.

When he went to his seat he was for a moment unable to decide which of his neighbours was the possessor of the seat he had sold back, but eventually there was an exchange of conversation on his right and he perceived that the young woman on the other side was without a companion. Though the hair that masked her face from him was far darker than Ann's blonde this only prompted in him the fleeting thought that no doubt Ann in this situation would naturally want to disguise herself or perhaps send an emissary to keep the place until a later stage in the opera—but when the houselights went down and he was able to steal a thorough glance he saw that he was sitting next to a stranger.

Almost immediately, as the Wagnerian fluid began to stir in the orchestra pit below, he gave her a character and a role in his life. Through the exchanges of Gurnemanz and the squires (the tedium of which he found difficult to admit to himself) he determined to speak to her at the first interval,

and invented his opening gambit and her reply. It seemed to him that not only could he carry all this in his head while listening to the opera, but also that his sensitivity to the music was thereby increased.

At the end of the act, after the strained and rustling silence produced by the injunction against applause for this sacred work, he turned towards the girl and told her of his former interest in her place. Soon they were having a drink in the bar. She had asked for a light ale: he was drinking a large gin, for he felt the effect fading of the Algerian wine he had had at his early dinner in Soho.

Her name was Joyce Hamer: she studied the piano at the Royal College of Music. He found touching her youth, her simplicity, the gold cross on a chain round her neck, her excessive pallor, her enthusiasm for the music, even the northern tones in her voice. He confessed his own northern origins.

In the second interval she would not go out: when they briefly spoke they seemed utter strangers. He thought, as he stood drinking his gin alone, that perhaps she did not care to accept his hospitality again and was too inexperienced to carry through the business of buying a round herself. He imagined her sitting in the deserted row, reading the Penguin Chekhov that he had observed her clutching with her handbag in tiny hands with babyish nails.

As they shuffled along the seats after the performance he asked her to have coffee with him, imagining that such a beverage at such an hour was perhaps her student-like habit. She agreed, and they walked down to a café in the Strand bright with mirrors, tea urns, tomatoes.

'I wonder why you really made this supreme effort to see *Parsifal*,' he said.

'Well, it isn't often done, is it?'

'I have a proprietorial interest in it. My name's Parsifal.' She didn't see the point.

'Percival. It's the same article. The curious thing is that I've seen the parallel almost as long as I can remember. When I was a child my aunt gave me a book called *The Adventures of*

King Arthur's Knights. Of course Parsifal came in one of the stories—called P-e-r-c-e-v-a-l. I don't think my aunt realized that, though her name was Percival, too. She's the only relation I have on my father's side. Goodness knows where they came from. He was called Carl, she Tercsa. There was obviously some foreign blood somewhere. Carl suggests something Teutonic, Tercsa something Hispanic. The odd thing was that my aunt did in fact go to South America, to Brazil, to take charge of some school for English children. That was long before the war, and I never hear from her.'

He was faintly conscious as he spoke that he would not like any of the other clients of the café to hear him. But the girl looked at him with a grave concentration and said: 'Do you mean you've modelled your life on Parsifal's?'

He felt more infantile than ever. 'Oh, it's just that I used to think that I was searching for a Grail.'

'Aren't you now?'

'No.'

She pondered. 'Parsifal means perfect fool.'

He laughed uneasily. 'I'm certainly that.' It seemed to him that never before this moment had he properly appreciated that the word also indicated 'complete'.

'I didn't mean it that way. *Durch Mitleid wissend, der reine Tor.*'

He was astounded at this little northern voice getting round the outlandish syllables. 'How do you come to know that?'

'I did it at school.'

'No, the quotation. Is it a quotation?'

'Well, I read Ernest Newman's *Wagner Nights* before I came.'

'What does it mean?'

'"Made wise through pity,"' she said, '"the blameless fool."'

'Say it again in German.'

She did so, and then added: 'You know, it's not really a search for the Grail. It's a search for the Spear.'

'Yes, I see that now you point it out.'

'Wagner altered the old legend.'

'I should have been searching for a spear. I wonder what that means.'

She moved the spoon in her saucer like a lever and said: 'I must be off now.'

'Where have you got to go to? Let me take you home.'

'No, it's all right. I can get the tube at Trafalgar Square.'

He thought that though it was difficult to say of her features that anything was too big or too small, they did not attract him. 'I'll walk you there, anyway,' he said.

As they went along the Strand he discovered that during term time she lived with her aunt and uncle in a flat in West End Lane; the uncle an exile from Preston in the Ministry of Education. 'Isn't it rather boring for you, living with relations away from home?'

She said, quite seriously: 'Mummy and Daddy are happier than if I were in digs.'

They had arrived at the entrance to the Underground. A wind had sprung up and was blowing her hair, which she combed to one side with her fingers not in order to say something but evidently out of politeness so that he could see her face. 'Can I ring you up there some time?' The question came out despite her lack of allure.

She said yes and gave him the number. When she had gone and he was turning back to the bus stop, it seemed to him that her physical presence had after all communicated to him a sense of the interesting unknown and his footsteps hesitated a second while he actually contemplated the practically hopeless pursuit of her so that he could prolong during the journey to West Hampstead the unresolved emotions of being in her company.

Waiting for his bus as there swept past him the taxis and the other buses bearing people who had still not exhausted the pleasures of the night reminded him of his first days as a reporter when he had discovered that the life of a city cannot be constantly, automatically enjoyed; that one takes the limitations of one's life to every new apparent liberation. The coffee had failed to quench his thirst: on the contrary. He longed to

be home, and visualized running the water from the curious brass tap in the kitchen until it was really cold, before filling his tumbler.

But when he let himself into 'the flat' he did not, as he had imagined, fly straight up to the kitchen. The light in the tiny hall at the top of the first flight of stairs failed to respond to his pressing the switch at the foot of the flight. When he had stumbled up the steps he was startled by a shadow moving abruptly on the white wall—no doubt, when he had thought about it, caused by a car turning into the street from the Fulham Road—and he slipped quickly into the drawing-room to put the light on there. He remembered an old forgotten thought: that when he grew to manhood he would be frightened to live alone. Had not the notion resulted from his seeing the dramatization of *Dracula*? Until the present he had never had occasion to revive it.

He imagined, as he stepped across the now partially-lit hall, that at the top of the second flight of stairs the Count was standing beside the tall cupboard. A feeling of unease came over him but he had soon reached the place and found it vampireless. He switched the light on up there and opened the cupboard to look for a lamp to replace the one in the hall. (It struck him that his terror of the dark had no doubt arisen in that remote and primitive epoch before they had lived at Green Head Lodge, when, the little house being lit by gas, long hiatuses without light had to be endured.) Rummaging among the polish tins, electric iron, shopping baskets, he came across a lidless cardboard box, evidently for dusters, in which he saw a very pale blue cardigan which he remembered Ann wearing off duty at *Resistance*. Its antiquity and her affection for it were evident from the elbow of a sleeve presented to his gaze—darnings of various dates, surrounded by cobweb-thin original stuff. As he continued to crouch there a sob escaped him, and soon he was weeping so hard that he had to let himself fall back into a sitting posture on the landing floor.

By the time he had fitted the new lamp and the hall was satisfactorily illuminable again he was more composed. As he let the tap run in the kitchen he had to give an occasional sniff,

but his mind was back on the events of the evening. He tried but failed to remember in German the quotation from *Parsifal*. Even in English, however, it seemed sufficiently profound. 'Made wise through pity, the blameless fool.' He realized that though he had for all those years fancied himself as the youthful knight, it had too rarely occurred to him that it was possible he was a real fool, even a 'blameless fool'. He raised the tumbler to his lips, feeling his life take on a different, though ungraspable, meaning.

All at once he remembered years ago buying biscuits for a strange dog; certainly he was capable of pity, though how could pity make him wise? Perhaps, instead of yearning, jealousy, hatred, he had to find pity for Ann; and sure enough he saw at once that 'working it out' with Bill Gagg, at the country cottage whose address she had bothered to communicate to him, was pathetically and feebly human.

He took a tumbler of water into the bedroom, but by himself there seemed little motive for actually going to bed. So his grandmother, after his grandfather's death and before her own illness, had been reluctant to retire. He had a sudden vivid memory of their bedroom, though in fact, despite his having slept for years in the room next to it, it had always seemed to him a strange place. Over the mantelpiece, in a brown frame, held by a brown mount, had been a large, imperfectly focused photograph of a moustached young soldier, the uncle killed in the First War, before he was even born. Only at this moment did he realize that his grandmother had had it placed there so that she could see it constantly from her bed. He could not recall her ever mentioning this eldest of her children except in response to his own curiosity: in fact, the emotion of grief had only on rare occasions—like the almost accidental visit they had paid together to Greenhead Cemetery—manifested itself in her in any formal manner. No doubt, it was from her that he had inherited his own stoical front—which in turn had led to the remorse he suffered at the deficiencies in his behaviour, particularly of kindness and affection to those now dead. And perhaps it was his soldier uncle's death that had in fact ensured his bringing up at

Garside. And how anguished his grandmother must have been (though he had failed to take it in at the time) at his own going to the wars, at the threat of her having to suffer yet another death 'in action' of someone she loved. But even such *aperçus* did not exhaust the meaning of the past which, indeed, he realized, was for his 'foolish' mind compounded of impenetrable significance and unmakeable connections. No wonder he had exasperated Ann.

He emptied his pockets on his chest of drawers and brought out with his loose change a scrap of paper on which was written HAM, followed by what seemed the incongruous price of twelve and tenpence. Later he remembered that this was not one of the shopping lists of his new bachelordom but Joyce Hamer's telephone number, and he went to clean his teeth playing tentatively with the notion that perhaps she at least would not have found him exasperating, and that in his turn he might come to find of greater interest her naïve but knowledgeable mind and the extreme youthfulness of her face which neither complete lack of make-up nor the quite deep lines running from the corners of her eyes could in the least impair.